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**HANDBOOK  
OF  
HINDU GODS, GODDESSES AND SAINTS**

**POPULAR IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH INDIA**





# **HANDBOOK OF HINDU GODS, GODDESSES AND SAINTS**

**POPULAR IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH INDIA**

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## Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	ix
<b>SECTION ONE: LORD OF BEGINNINGS</b>	
1. Gaṇapati (or, Gaṇeśa)	3
Notes to Section One	11
<b>SECTION TWO: ŚIVA AND HIS ASSOCIATES</b>	
2. Śiva-Liṅga	14
3. Śiva-Mahāyogin	24
4. Śiva-Naṭarāja	30
5. Śiva-Somāskanda	38
6. Pārvatī	48
7. Māṇikkavācakar (9th century)	52
8. Śaṅkara (8th century)	58
9. Rāmalinga (b. 1823)	64
Notes to Section Two	72
<b>SECTION THREE: VIṢṆU AND ASSOCIATED FIGURES</b>	
10. Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa	76
11. Hanumān	82
12. Bālakṛṣṇa	90
13. Kṛṣṇa Veṅugopāla	92
14. Kṛṣṇa Gitācārya	96
15. Kṛṣṇa with Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā	100
16. Kṛṣṇa Guruvāyūrappaṇ	102
17. Raṅganātha (at Śrīraṅgam)	106
18. Veṅkaṭeśvara	117
19. The Śālagrāma-Stone	124
20. Nammālvār (8th century)	132
21. Rāmānuja (11th century)	138
22. Madhva (early 14th century)	143

23. Rāghavendra (b. 1601)	151
Notes to Section Three	159

#### **SECTION FOUR: SELECTED GODDESSES**

24. Devī Durgā	166
25. Devī Kālī	172
26. Devī Kāmākṣī	176
27. Devī Lakṣmī	181
28. Devī Māriyamman	188
29. Devī Minākṣī	194
30. Devī Sarasvatī	200
Notes to Section Four	206

#### **SECTION FIVE: OTHER FIGURES AND FORMS WIDELY WORSHIPPED**

31. Aiyāṅār	210
32. Ayyappaṅ	218
33. Murukaṅ	225
34. The Nāgas and Their Worship	234
35. The Tulasī Plant (The Sacred Basil Plant)	241
Notes to Section Five	247
Appendix : Hymns of Adoration	251
Glossary	259
Suggestions for Further Study	293
Index	301

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What has at last resulted from our combined efforts grew out of a working relationship between the co-authors that started more than thirty years ago. It began as early as 1962 while we were preparing some other materials for publication. During our breaks we would fall into conversation, casually sharing impressions of a variety of matters with one another. Time and again we returned to topics that, later on, would become themes for the volume that had not yet entered our minds. By 1975 we had each acquitted ourselves of several, prior commitments and we began to feel free to concentrate more on what fascinated us increasingly. It was only then that we found we had focused on specific figures within Hinduism which allowed us scope to engage those themes. We commenced some preliminary, targeted research and soon decided on a short-essay format. In 1979-80 we stole moments from other tasks that occupied us during that period and produced over two dozen draft essays, working into the evenings and over weekends quite literally elbow to elbow at a single writing table. In 1988 we culled from those plus what we had in the intervening years independently produced and shared in correspondence, polished the selections we made and sought a publisher for what was by then something near the collection now in readers' hands. Looking back over those many years, our collaboration was so intense that it is now difficult for either of us to identify which

ideas came from whom, who was more responsible than the other for any of the essays. Suffice it to say that while each brought his own perspectives to this friendly project, in the end they melded into a unique, combined statement. We are pleased to report that each feels to have learned immeasurably from the other, and that both have benefited as each in his own way has been able to carry over into his professional life not only the gain of knowledge but also the memory of so satisfactory a working relationship.

The American co-author must thank the funding sources which made possible his travel to India over the years. The Department of Religion and the College of Arts and Sciences of Syracuse University consistently encouraged his field research by honoring their generous leave policies throughout Smith's 35 years on the faculty and by supporting him during his leaves of absence as well as providing much appreciated subvention from discretionary funds and faculty development grants for brief conferences in India (1982, 1986). Major funding came in the form of a Lilly Foundation Post-Doctoral Research Grant (1962-63), a Fulbright-Hays Senior Faculty Research Grant in Religion (1979-80), and a Senior Faculty Research Grant (1966-1967) and two Short Term Faculty Research Grants (1975, 1988) from the American Institute of Indian Studies. Without such sustained help this collaboration would never have come to fruition.

*H. Daniel Smith & M. Narasimhachary, co-authors*

## Introduction

What is a good way for one who is unfamiliar with the tradition to learn more about Hinduism? To be sure, different people have their own opinions on this matter. To judge from the many textbooks and college-level courses which serve as introductions to Hinduism, there is in fact no unanimity at all. Some evidently feel that it is useful to approach the diversity of Hinduism through a study of its historical development from earliest times to the present; according to that strategy it is important to begin with what is known about conditions in the so-called Indus Valley Period then move through the Vedic, Brahmanical, Upanishadic, the Epic and Puranic, and Bhakti periods up to the Advent of Modernity until one reaches, at last, the complex Contemporary Scene. Others recommend an examination of selected specimens of Hindu literature, all the while seeking to appreciate the respective cultural contexts which gave voice to those utterances; consequently, readings, either in original languages or in translation, in their entirety or in judicious abridgements, are advanced in order to sample the *Vedas*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Smṛti* texts, Epics, *Purāṇas*, *Bhakti* hymns and reform tracts. Still others suggest the importance of acquiring a conceptual perspective as a helpful starting point since doctrines and values are at the heart of Hinduism; their emphasis is placed, then, on ideology as it derives from traditional notions about *saṃsāra*, *karma*, *varṇāśramadharma*, *puruṣārtha*, and the like. Yet others advise that Hinduism as a way of life invites exploration of what believers are observed to do; accordingly, that enterprise concentrates on rituals and celebrations ranging from the most ordinary daily routines through the performance of life-cycle rites and domestic litanies to the formal, liturgical worship at shrines and in temples. A few advocate study of the great philosophical systems, and enjoin beginners to learn something of the presuppositions, constructs and distinctions inherent in schools of *Yoga*, perhaps also of *Mīmāṃsā* and surely *Vedānta* interpretations as well as of *Śaiva Siddhānta* and other, later expressions of philosophical theology. Some turn to the testimony of monuments and masterpieces of the visual

and performing arts, analyzing architecture, sculpture, painting and dance, drama and song as expressions of the creativity which is generated by faith.

In this volume we submit that to understand something essential about Hinduism one does well early on to gain some familiarity with the gods, goddesses, saints and supernaturals which have been honored by the faithful over the generations. We are not so rash as to counsel this approach as the "only" or the "best" way. Anyone with any appreciation at all for the complex nature of living Hinduism knows that no one topic or methodology suffices adequately alone to probe the depths and scan the surfaces of all that currently flourishes—even in one limited area. Yet our venture in this book is to provide for our readers what we hope will be, at least, an avenue of access to the multifaceted nature of the traditional Hinduism to be found in south India today. And it is a procedure that makes good sense to us because consideration of selected figures and objects of adoration there at hand leads so effortlessly to other reflections pertinent to the larger subject beyond our limited scope. So, what we have done here is to use the idea of the holy in Hinduism in south India as a springboard for our readers to muse upon associated teachings and customs in the more massive tradition at large. We hope our procedure will persuade readers—whether non-Hindus or Hindus distanced for one reason or another from the tradition—to move on not only to more specialized but also to more broad-ranging studies in their on-going effort to learn more about things Hindu and Indian.

This is not the first time that the divinities of Hinduism have been utilized to initiate interested readers into the lore of the Hindu multitudes. In fact, this effort stands merely as the latest in a line of similar endeavors in English stretching back more than two centuries. Among the predecessors more or less pan-Hindu in their scope must be named E. Moor's, *The Hindu Pantheon* [1810], J. Dowson's *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* [1879], W.L. Wilkins' *Hindu Mythology* [1882], E.O. Martin's *Gods of India* [1913], P. Thomas' *Epics, Myths and Legends of India* [1948], A. Danielou's *Hindu Polytheism* [1964] and Prataditya Pal's *Hindu Religion and Iconology* [1981]. At the same time must be acknowledged the specifically south Indian focus of such works as T.A. Gopinatha Rao's *Elements of Hindu Iconography* [1914], W.T. Elmore's *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism* [1915], H. Krishna Sastri's *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses* [1916],

H. Whitehead's *The Village Gods of South India* [1916] and T.N. Srinivasan's *Handbook of South Indian Images* [1954]—to say nothing of G. Jouveau-Dubreuil's work in French and B. Ziegenbalg's work in German. These have all served to influence us in one way or another to highlight to such a degree as we do the visual aspects of the figures presented. To focus on what is "seen" of a divinity during *darśana* "by those who have eyes to see" is, clearly, a central thrust of our effort here. Indeed, a feature which we hope very much will set this survey of Hindu gods and goddesses, saints and supernaturals apart from earlier studies is the repeated emphasis here on the impact which representations of these figures have on "visually literate" Hindus. The reason for our emphasis on the visual aspects of the divine is really quite straight-forward. In a populace where literacy in terms of reading and writing is not the norm,<sup>1</sup> much of what gets transmitted from one generation to the next is accomplished by means of oral and visual modes of instruction. We believe it is a fact more common than is generally given credit by Indologists that complex theological teachings and subtle doctrinal norms get mediated to a "visually literate" public by means of highly developed yet widely shared pictographic and iconographic codes, that is, by an impressively popular heritage of visual signs and symbols. Moreover, this is a heritage that binds together groups of Hindus otherwise separated by language barriers and by dissimilar literary traditions. Clearly, statistics of so-called "literacy rates" do not always tell the whole truth about regional sophistication, cultural diffusion, and ideological integration—or about "visual literacy"!

Each of the 35 essays in this volume is accompanied by a line drawing, and in the majority of those 35 essays we attempt to point out what the iconography may mediate both at the level of ordinary identification and at the level of mystical accommodation to a believer already steeped in the lore of the faith. What has impressed us, and what we hope will strike the reader in turn, is the immediacy and eloquence even popular depictions of deities, saints and sacred objects have in terms of helping the "visually literate" to recollect a saving act, a model life, a gracious presence. We remain grateful to our collaborator, the late Madras artist K.S. Ramu, for providing the drawings which we utilize here as visual "reference texts." That he endeavored to make his renderings reflect both the style and symbolism of the widely-disseminated "framing pictures" and "calendar prints" of Hindu gods,



goddesses and saints available in the popular market only serves to make his contribution the more valuable to this project.

The 35 essays just mentioned are clustered into groups, as can be noted by quick reference to the table of Contents. However, the essays may be read independently of one another: there is really no beginning, middle, or ending in this volume despite its current lay-out. The reader is encouraged to start with whatever figures are of greatest interest. Cross references linking some essays to others will soon enough lead the casual reader informally to various sections of the collection. In recognition of this loosely-knit structure of the volume we have called it a *Handbook*, as it may be used for ready reference.<sup>2</sup>

Let us explain the other elements of our title.

It has not been possible or practical for us to attempt coverage of all the gods, goddesses and saints known and celebrated in the Hindu tradition past and present—for obvious reasons—even in south India. By *Popular*, then, we mean that we have selected those figures recognized and honored within fairly large, main line constituencies. Accordingly, we were able to ignore the remote and obscure. The further qualification *Contemporary* meant that we determined to focus on figures popular during the closing decades of the 20th century, even though those might include ancient deities and saints from earlier centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Our conscious confinement to *South India* needs to be further noted. That move was influenced by the fact that our own experience of Hinduism has been chiefly (but not exclusively) there. Our observations there have served to persuade both of us that in contemporary south Indian Hindu traditions it is possible to observe manifestations of Hinduism that are unique, lively, and instructive. Those expressions have been too often passed over in surveys which have tried to stress in Hinduism a pan-Indian homogeneity. We wanted instead to suggest to interested readers that while there is much in south Indian Hinduism that shows continuities with what prevails elsewhere in the subcontinent yet at the same time there are popular traditions in the contemporary Dravidian south that are characteristically region-specific.

Our choice of figures and phenomena for presentation by no means inventories *all* that currently flourishes in south India. While we have selected

for our field of sampling the contemporary political states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala (this is to say, areas where Tamil, Telugu, Kannada—or Kanarese—and Malayalam languages, literatures and cultures dominate), we have opted for a selection of those regionally popular deities, devotees, and devices which will constitute an exemplary rather than an exhaustive inventory. Another glance at the table of Contents testifies to the attempts we have made to present an even-handed treatment; we have devoted approximately equal attention to Śiva-related and to Viṣṇu-related examples. We are quite certain that we may still be faulted for what some may perceive to be an arithmetic imbalance. Moreover, as scholars our perspective is necessarily scholastic and, beyond that, Sanskritic—perhaps too much so for many tastes and, more importantly, for the subject. But we opted to risk blame on that account rather than to take refuge in the safety of mute caution. There is so much that remains to be reported about south Indian religious life. We felt it important to make what small contribution we can. And, because we sense our own limitations, we invite future authors to surpass our efforts and improve what we have perforce left imperfectly done.

In closing, let us turn to some procedural decisions that were made during the execution of this volume. Four in particular deserve mention.

First, most transliterations of Indic words follow Sanskritic usage; a few reflect Tamil usage. Contextual considerations have on occasion forced some inconsistencies, especially in regard to proper names. At the same time, however, we have standardized the spellings of most place-names by following gazetteer guidelines published by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (if and when the place-names we cited were mentioned).

The second had to do with calendrical calculations and the corresponding citations we subsequently made in our essays to special seasons and holidays. A complex set of considerations determined what we finally decided to do. To begin with, there are at least two entirely different calendrical systems and no fewer than three different names for each month in the four language regions of south India. Among most Tamilians and Malayalis a solar reckoning is followed for a twelve month year, while among many Kannada and Telugu speaking folk and some others the year is calculated according

to a lunar calendar (with solar reckoning). Consequently, in different regions of the "South India" we describe, the months in those two systems are of different durations (from 29 to 32, and occasionally more, days), and they commence at different times. Unlike some of their neighbors of the North—for example, those in Hindi-speaking areas—the people of Andhra Pradesh and large parts of Karnataka and elsewhere throughout the south of India start their lunar month on the day following the new moon [*Amāvāsyā*] rather than on the day following the full moon [*Pūrṇimā*]. That detail is likely to cause confusion among those familiar only with customs in certain parts of north India, not to mention those unfamiliar with lunar calculations in the first place. The phase of the moon has no effect, however, on the commencement of the months in most of Tamil Nadu and in parts of Kerala. Beyond these discrepancies, the New Year in south India is ushered in at three different times according to which system is followed. Furthermore, certain other distinctions, often quite subtle, may be noticed within the two systems as the result of what might be called sectarian conventions, for which reason Śaivas and Smārtas may celebrate a given holiday one day while their Vaiṣṇava neighbors at the same place may observe it the next day.<sup>4</sup> We have sought to minimize these various difficulties by referring primarily to the *Amānta* system, the one most prevalent in south India,<sup>5</sup> and citing months consistently by their standardized Sanskrit names followed by their rough equivalents in the Western/Julian calendar in parentheses. To make our calculations more understandable to those conversant only with Tamil and Malayali reckoning, we have often followed our citations with their equivalents used in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala. As an expedient authority we have occasionally resorted to the Indian National Calendar and to the Tamil solar calendar (as rendered in the widely-respected calendar in English published annually for several decades now by Hoe & Co., Madras) in fixing elusive dates. We are quite certain that we have not solved all the problems for our readers but, as the vernacular Americanism goes, "we gave it our best shot."

The third procedural decision worth mentioning is that we resolved to limit our *Suggestions for Further Study* to a reasonable number of bibliographical references—an upper limit of three, surely not more than four, citations for each essay. The final sum of "108" should surely come as no surprise to readers of a volume dealing with the symbolic in Hindu religious life!

The individuals whom we cite there comprise not so much a record of works we consulted in the preparation of this volume as a series of recommendations we make to interested readers. It is our hope that they will use those citations for identifying some of the authors whose research and writing bear usefully upon subjects treated in our essays. Our inventory is bound to be controversial, given the variety of concerns we did, indeed, touch upon in the essays and the rich resources available from which to draw. The responsibility was ours, then, to list what we considered might be the most useful, informative or accessible approaches for someone who, although highly motivated to learn more about Hinduism, is still relatively new to the study. We would be the first to admit that our registry is not exhaustive.

Finally, each of us has spent significant portions of our academic careers working with overseas Indians. We both have a special concern for their needs. So, in addition to whomever else may use this handbook profitably (college students as a collateral reading assigned in courses in anthropology, art history, Indian civilization, or religious studies courses; "north India" specialists who may never have travelled south, who seek an "Introduction" to aspects of south Indian culture; cultural geographers, South Asian historians and the like; and other travelers and ordinary folk reading for enrichment), we hope we have offered here some small assistance to those increasing ranks of foreign-born Indians who are searching for their traditional roots. Our thrust throughout has been to engage their welcome concerns.

## NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Dependably accurate figures are hard to come by, but most would be hard pressed to contradict the following estimate; approximately two out of five adult males and only about one out of five adult females are passably literate, that is, only a scant third of India's present population can deal in practical terms with letters, words, written sentences. Even this statistic may turn out to be a high-water mark for modern times. According to a recent report (*The Statesman*, New Delhi, 6 May 1988, page 3), India may move into the 21st century as the most illiterate nation in the world. Unless current trends are reversed, about half the world's illiterate people will be living in India by the year 2000.
2. An earlier arrangement placed the contents in alphabetical order according to the subject of the essays. That arrangement was abandoned because reminiscent of a "dictionary" or an "encyclopaedia," neither of which it was ever our remote intention to simulate.

3. An earlier version of our collection contained additional essays on saintly figures closer to our own times—viz., Shirdi Sai Baba (b. 1820?....1850?), H.H. the Senior Sankaracharya Swamy of Kanci (b. 1894), Ramachandraji of Shahjahanpur (b. 1899), Jillellamudi Amma (1923-1985), and Satya Sai Baba (b. 1926). They have not been included because, unlike the others, they have not yet withstood the test of time nor yet won universal acceptance. The historical figures who remain as subjects of our essays all have well-established cults about which there can be little controversy insofar as we have accurately reported them.
4. If all this is puzzling to an outsider it can also be a source of confusion to a Hindu; to verify and anticipate dates people all over India resort to printed almanacs, called *pañcāṅgas*. In Tamil Nadu, for example, Smārtas and Śrī-vaishnavas respectively defer to detailed almanacs promulgated by the Śaṅkarācārya of Kāmakōṭi Pīṭha (Kāñci) and by the Jī of Ahobila Math (Ahobilam, Andhra Pradesh), while the Smārtas and Vaiṣṇavas of Karnataka resort to what is disseminated by the Śaṅkarācārya residing at Śrīgeri and the pontiff at Uḍupi Math, respectively, while still others defer to yet other reckonings.
5. The *Amānta* system reckons the month between successive new moons, while the alternative *Pūrṇimānta* system reckons the month between successive full moons. In the system we use here the first fortnight of each month is the “bright” half of the month during which the moon is waxing. Neither of the luni-solar systems of reckoning corresponds to the way in which the Tamil solar months are reckoned—despite the similarities of the months’ names and the occasional proximity of those to the alternate way(s) of naming months in the annual cycle.

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**SECTION ONE**  
**Lord of Beginnings**





# 1

## Gaṇapati

Gaṇapati (or Gaṇeśa), the elephant-headed deity, is very much like two other Hindu divinities with beastlike semblances. Along with Hanumān [q.v.] and Garuḍa he also enjoys immense popularity throughout the entire Asian world. Images of Gaṇapati's corpulent presence will be found in Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, China and Japan. But it is at home in India where this god finds his most ardent votaries. He is undoubtedly the most popular god of the masses in the entire subcontinent. Throughout the land which gave him birth, his form combining both beast and man is worshipped in temples, homes, schools, offices, factories—even at improvised shrines under trees or near intersections of streets. Daily, millions recite his name at the beginning of their prayers as the first god to whom adoration belongs. Travellers invoke his protection at the outset of a journey. Students petition his assistance at the commencement of a new school term. Businessmen honor him at the start of a new fiscal year. Factory workers call upon him at the dedication of a new plant or assembly line. He is worshipped whenever one wishes success in any fresh venture, whenever new beginnings are made and safety, good luck, and rewards are wanted. In this way he surely lives up to his name as "Lord of the Multitudes" [*gaṇa*, "numbers, hosts troops"; *pati*, "father, master, lord" or *īśa*, "lord, god, master"]. And it is appropriate that we begin our book with due account of this principal deity.

Another explanation may be advanced for his priority and popularity among the many Hindu gods. This pot-bellied deity was born, it is said, the most handsome of all the divinities. But one day in an extraordinary set of circumstances his head was cut off. He took on the curious appearance by which he is recognized today when his own missing



**Fig. 1. Ganapati**

head was hastily replaced by that of an elephant. In view of what had happened to this innocent son of the great goddess Pārvatī [q.v.], and since in any case he ranked high among them because of his relationship to Śiva, and also inasmuch as his divine friends and celestial companions wanted somehow to compensate him for his lost beauty, all the gods and goddesses, the heavenly hosts and spirits of all the realms—both visible and invisible—pledged among themselves ever thereafter and always to honor the elephant-headed one before undertaking any activity. His name, then, indicates his sovereignty over the heavenly hosts as well as the countless earthbound goblins.

But Gaṇapati is known by many other names as well. Those names serve as clues to his functional identity among the millions who worship him. In addition to offering thus an index to his popularity, some of the names also relate to his iconographic representations. We have already explained his best known synonymous names, "Gaṇapati" and "Gaṇeśa." He is also known as "Vināyaka" and "Vighneśvara," both of which names refer to his ability to overcome obstacles. His looks are emphasized in all the following popular epithets: "Gajājana" ("Elephant-Faced"), "Vakratuṇḍa" ("the one with the Curved Trunk"), "Ekadanta" ("he who has One Tooth [Tusk]"), "Lambodara" ("Pot-Bellied"), and "Dvīdehaka" ("he who has the Coupled ['Two'] Body"). That he rides the rat as his *vāhana* is expressed in both names "Ākṣuratha" and "Mūṣakavāhana." The nickname "Pīṭṭaiyār" ("Noble Child") is widely used among Tamil speakers. Beyond these, there are other names as well, but few of those are used in popular worship.

His depiction is always immediately recognizable by the elephant's head placed atop a human torso. He may be shown with as many as sixteen hands, but four are more usual. Most representations show him seated, although many times he is shown standing, even dancing. Our line-drawing (Fig. 1) of Gaṇapati shows him seated on a pedestal, with his left leg characteristically tucked under him. His right leg here is bent at the knee, and drawn up [*rājahlāsaṇa*]<sup>1</sup>—although it is in other

renderings often shown dangling down [*ardhaparyavikāśana*], or crossed over the left leg in a yogic position. Apart from the usual ornaments associated with an exalted personality, he also wears the *dhott*, an uppercloth, and the *upavīta*-cord. In addition, there are a number of distinguishing details in his iconographic presentation, each of which is intimately associated with legends about him, and some of which deserve special notice.

Now, the very first thing which strikes one looking at his body is that it is anything but lithe and beautiful, despite the eulogies which persist in praise of his handsome original form. His legs are stumpy, and his belly is huge. In his appearance he bears a close resemblance to the hordes of obese dwarfs [*gaṇas*] who are also associated with his legions. His distended stomach is girded by a snake, recalling a story of gross overeating. His pudgy arms hold, respectively, a piece of his own tusk, an *anikuśa*-goad, a *pāśa*-noose, and a mango fruit. Those weapons in his upper two hands are standard elements of this deity's iconography. The piece of tusk reminds of a story involving a feat of memory, while the mango fruit prompts thoughts of the prize he won from Śiva and Pārvatī. The very presence of the elephant-head has already been connected with a tale of a hurried exchange. In its depiction it usually features, as here, a curving trunk, a broken tusk, two small but watchful eyes,<sup>1</sup> and floppy ears. The *tilaka*-mark on his forehead reiterates his close relationship to Śiva. The rat at his feet is his *vāhana*, his constant companion, as beady-eyed and restless as Gaṇapati is pensive and relaxed.

To be sure, all of these elements may be constructed mystically. It is not practical here to try to indicate esoteric interpretations for all these separately. Some examples must suffice to demonstrate that in Gaṇapati's imagery there is a consistency of intentional statement expressing at once his overwhelming physical presence as overcomer of obstacles and his formidable presence of mind as foremost among the gods. Let us start with the most obvious, the juxtapositions of the elephant, human, and rodent forms. Here, one interpretation is to see the largest of all

living land animals and the diminutive rat as polarities in the animal realms of physical prowess—one achieving results by brute strength, the other by patient labor. Another interpretation is to discern that at the level of intellectual gifts the elephant and the rat represent polarities as well—one, the epitome of reflective, retentive, wide-ranging wisdom (“an elephant never forgets”); the other, a model for vigorous, quick-witted and penetrating cunning (no granary is safe from the persistent rodent). In either case, the human representative sits squarely in between, a mediating agent in relation to the counterpaired modes. Man in his condition as a worldly creature needs both kinds of physical endowments to overcome difficulties along his daily way so strewn with unexpected obstacles, just as he needs both kinds of mental capacities to master the dialectics of mundane options so often presented in life’s ambiguous circumstances. The elephant-headed Gaṇeśa with his *vāhana*, then, articulates a concise statement of man’s needs at the human plane.

His four arms display symbols of god’s ever present and renewing powers of grace—to restore lost memories of divine guidance and holy revelation (tusk);<sup>2</sup> to stimulate the lagging spirit to fresh efforts on the spiritual path (*anikuśa*-goad); to rescue from harm and accident all who roam too far from his gentle presence (*pāśa*-noose); to offer the fruits of immortality as prize to all who approach him in faith (*phala*). His rotund paunch, both literally and figuratively the center of his being, is stuffed to overflowing with sweet and acceptable things. This indicates to the reflective person that not only is it in his fulness where the source of all nourishment is to be sought but also that it is in him alone that all things sacrificed—large or small, self or substitute—find their ultimate consummation.

As for the ears and trunk of his elephant head, these too have their suggestive meanings. The shape of the floppy ears conjures up the image of the fan-like instrument used by peasants to winnow the chaff from the wheat. This, in turn, suggests that anyone who is knowledgeable—be he divine or human—has at his disposal the ability to discriminate

between the less important and the more important, between the less urgent and the more urgent, between the impermanent and the eternal. The curving trunk presents a shape symbolic of spiritual turning, and indicates that the steep path to the higher planes of pure intelligence is not always without unexpected twists and turns.

The interpretation of the iconographic details of a figure so richly invested with meaning by popular devotion can proceed indefinitely. Each element in his complex array of visual clues conveys a signal of something in his constitution or refers to some event in his sacred story—often to more than merely one at once. And, each clue may be construed at some important, esoteric level, or at several, simultaneously. For example, the broken tusk is not explained merely by allusion to his restoration of the Vedas: it has reference to at least three other episodes in Gaṇapati's life (when he threw his tusk at the moon; when he used it as a weapon against a demon; when, in anger, Śiva broke it with his trident). Or, for another example, the object held in his lower left hand is not always seen to be a mango (it may be a pomegranate; it may be a rose-apple; it may be a *modaka*-cake). Accordingly, the mystic meanings assigned to the iconographic details shift as their supposed references in Hindu lore alter. As elsewhere in Hindu iconography, so here, the symbolism is rarely univalent in character; it is almost always multivalent in value.

Gaṇapati is also occasionally represented aniconographically, that is, by a disembodied symbol. In his case two signs are regularly used to signify his presence, the "*svastika*"-mark and the "*praṇava*"-letter. In the first case, in addition to displaying a well-known emblem of well-being [*su* + *asti*] and good luck, the broken cross sounds deep resonances with his curved trunk, and a similar spiritual message may be derived from it. In the second case, the ubiquitous trunk in Gaṇapati's depiction, curving as it does toward his left before bending abruptly to his right, resembles the shape of the "*praṇava*"-letter for "Om" (ॐ) when initially written [ॐ]. Thus, those who meditate on the sacred

syllable "see" in it not only the elephantine essence of their benign lord, but equate with him all that is mystically associated with the sign, commonly regarded to be token of the Vedas and all the wisdom contained therein.<sup>3</sup>

Although there are temples throughout the South found dedicated primarily to the worship of Gaṇapati, the presence of the Gāṇapatya cult (= those who worship Gaṇapati as the Supreme One who creates, maintains and destroys) is not particularly noteworthy.<sup>4</sup> The elephant-faced god is additionally found enshrined in Śiva temples as well as in those devoted to Durgā and to Subrahmanya.<sup>5</sup> His dispersion throughout the South in home sanctuaries and at shrines in schools, factories and by roadsides has already been noted. In all those places he receives from his votaries the honor befitting his status as son of Śiva and Pārvatī. Tuesday is considered an auspicious day for his worship, and larger numbers than usual gather before his image on that day. Many will be seen performing a peculiar act of contrition: after pausing humbly behind the likeness of his *vāhana*, the rat, they will approach close to Gaṇapati, tap their temples thrice with the knuckles of both hands, then cross their arms so that with opposite hands they tug their earlobes three times while simultaneously bobbing in place.

Sometime during August or September (the fourth day of the fortnight during which the moon is waxing in *Bhādrapada* month) one witnesses the commemoration of Gaṇapati's birth. This is so universally observed throughout the South that the day itself is declared a legal holiday by the government. The commemorations among the devout last longer than just the one day, however, and often extend to three, in many cases up to nine, days. And, celebrations will be carried out both in the home and in the public places of Gaṇapati's worship. What is most often called "*Vināyaka-caturthī*" begins then that morning. In homes, a small image of Gaṇapati, often made of clay especially for the occasion, is readied by placing it on a pedestal over which grains of rice have been spread; it is so arranged to face North. For those who do not



have an image of Gaṇapati, a handful of turmeric powder is roughly modeled into a cone shape. Whatever is used, however, Gaṇapati's divine presence is invoked to reside there during the temporary period of ministrations. A miniature umbrella, mango leaves, varieties of wild flowers and grasses, stalks of sugarcane as well as fruits he is known to favor, and *modaka*-cakes—these are among the things advanced to the deity's presence. Stories of his birth and of his subsequent miracles are recounted in his hearing to those gathered. This is followed by a big meal for the family, featuring special dishes prominent among which are sweets. A liturgy similar to the morning cycle is repeated in the evening, and both are repeated again on the next day and, more often than not, on the day following that as well. Sometime during the first day visits to homes of friends are made, for there is a sentiment which persists even today that one should see nine different installations of Gaṇapati on the day of his birth.

In temples devoted to Gaṇapati, and in the larger shrines where his image is placed, much the same is done—except it is performed more elaborately and lasts longer. The public celebrations of Gaṇapati's birth extend to nine days. But whether the observance is made for one day only, or for nine days, whether done in the privacy of one's home or in a place of public worship, at the conclusion of the "*Vindhyaka-caturthī*" the clay (or powder) effigy is divested of its holy power by prayers, then is carried—sometimes with great pomp—to water. There at the seaside, or riverbank, or temple tank, or well, the image is submerged. The worshipper turns away, confident as he traces his steps back home that the Lord who has been so attentively served will, during the coming year, attend kindly on him and on his family.

An interesting development may be noted, in closing, in regard to the many-faceted worship of Gaṇapati. By tradition the elephant-headed god is most often thought of as a *brahmacārin*, that is, as a celibate. In the South where it is so often the case that a presiding deity is displayed with his female consort(s), it is not unusual to encounter

depictions of Gaṇapati flanked on either side by consorts—identified as Buddhi (“Wisdom”) and Siddhi (“Success”)—or even holding on his lap a goddess in his attitude toward whom there is an evident glint of eroticism. That this tendency to contemplate Gaṇapati in conjunction with his *śakti* as personified feminine form reveals clear influences of “tantrism” is obvious. There are, indeed, museum-pieces which show examples of the presence in the South at an earlier time of Gaṇapati imaged as an amatory figure engaged in dalliance with a female form. But today there is little evidence of this in south India’s living faith. There the elephant-headed god is most regularly conceived of as a bachelor. Traces of his fertility potential may, however, be preserved in his coloring, red or yellow, both of which in Indian terms are dynamic colors.<sup>6</sup> His ability to stir is, in any case, what is most obvious about this ingenious idol of the masses.<sup>7</sup>

### NOTES TO SECTION ONE

1. In some renderings Gaṇapati is shown with three eyes, the third eye (of “wisdom”) placed vertically in the forehead between the other two.
2. The most common explanation of the broken tusk is that, when the Vedic scriptures were destroyed by demons, Gaṇapati took what was nearest at hand, one of his tusks, broke it off, dipped it in ink, and wrote out in long hand the entire sum of the revealed wisdom. So, in one stroke he saved mankind by returning for the good of all the sacred contents of holy writ which, but for his prodigious memory, would otherwise have been lost to the world. His scribal expertise is likewise gratefully remembered by his devotees as they identify him with the legendary amanuensis who wrote down the entire *Mahābhārata* dictated by Vyāsa.
3. Pious Hindus with Gaṇapati in their hearts profess to “see” their lord whenever an elephant comes into view—a not uncommon sight in traditional quarters near large temples in south India.
4. Adherents to the Gāṇapatya cult identify themselves visibly by placing on their foreheads, just where the eyebrows meet, a line curving upward at either end. The line is reminiscent of the crescent moon on its side. It is usually surmounted by a daub of red powder.
5. An elephant-headed deity, usually referred to as Vināyaka, is often found in Viṣṇu temples, too—more often carved on a pillar than located in a separate shrine. That likeness holds in its upper two hands the *cakra* (discus) and *śankha* (conch)

of Viṣṇu rather than the normative *arkuśa* and *pāśa*, and the forehead will display the *ūrdhva-puṇḍra* mark rather than the *tilaka*. The function of marshal of the hosts, in Vaiṣṇava theology, is assigned to Viṣvakṣena ("he whose hosts or powers go everywhere, the All-Conqueror").

6. Red is associated with the activating *rajoguṇa*, with vivifying blood [*rakta*], and with the rising sun of a new day. Yellow is associated with stimulating sandalwood paste, with glistening gold, hence with the fructifying sun as also with the bursting Hiraṇyagarbha, primeval egg of existence. Gaṇapati's resemblance to the moon, which also accounts for his white appearance (sometimes effected by means of decorating him with white garments), has additional relations to fertility, to inseminating fields, to recurring menses, and to fluctuating mentation.
7. We may refer in this connection to the "Milk-miracle" that set the entire Indian subcontinent out of gear on August 29th, 1995, when stone-images of Vināyaka in temples and domestic shrines are reported to have literally "sipped" quantities of cows milk offered by devotees. While the highly devout believe it to have been a divine miracle, the more scientifically tempered people brushed this possibility aside as a phenomenon caused by surface-tension of liquids. No such "miracle" is reported either a day prior to, or later than, that particular day.

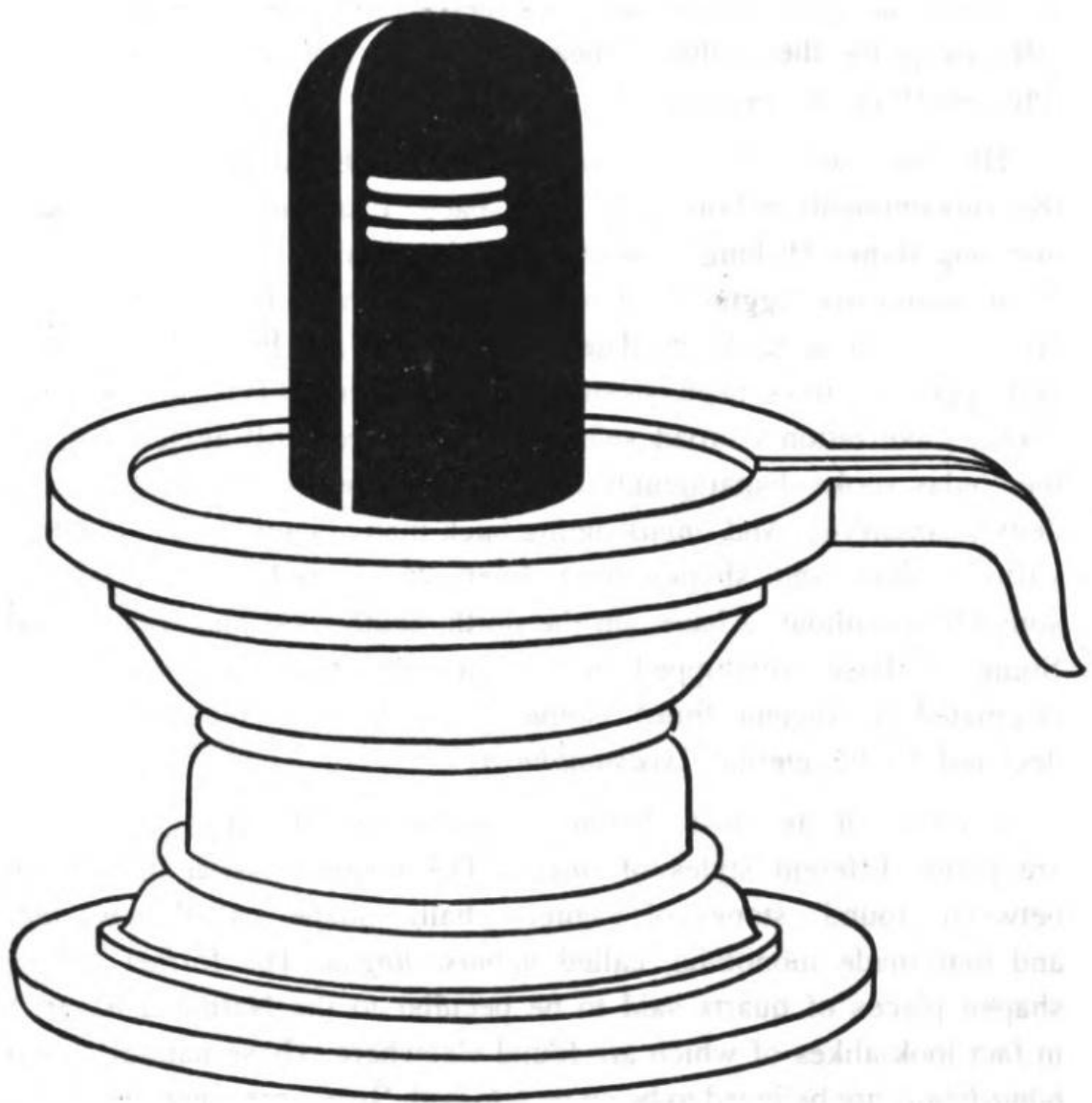
**SECTION TWO**

**Śiva and His Associates**

## Śiva Liṅga

It is ironic that the most ordinary emblem of one of the most popular gods in all of Hinduism is the most widely misunderstood. The word "*liṅga*" in its primary sense means "sign, emblem, mark, guise, evidence." The *liṅga* of Śiva is, first and foremost, a symbol of the presence of the great god [*mahādeva*]. It expresses in aniconic terms—that is, without resort to human or animal imagery—the belief that the Lord [*īśvara*] fully discloses himself in the form before our eyes, the rising *liṅga* itself. Any Hindu who sees a *liṅga* knows what it stands for—the deity Śiva, and no other. And, when worshipped, it is used in place of some other, more specific image of the Lord. To millions of Hindus the *liṅga* signifies his being, and that is all.

But the word "*liṅga*" may also be understood as a "sign" of something else, specifically of gender. And this leads to the distinctly secondary meaning of Śiva's aniconic shape, as a symbol of his procreative potency. For, Śiva is the paradigmatic deity of the Hindu pantheon for gender potential. In regard to his sex identity he is at one moment the "macho" male of ithyphallic virility, at the next moment he is the bland hermaphrodite with a blend of bisexual characteristics, and at another moment the awesome asexual being who is devoid of any libidinous drives whatsoever. The *liṅga* of Śiva is often misinterpreted as simply a sign of the erect male sex organ, a phallic emblem *par excellence*. But to view it that way is to see it in isolation and out of context; that misinterpretation ignores the invariable presence of the round base which supports the *liṅga* and is penetrated by it. That round base is called a "*yoni*," a word which means "seat, place of rest, receptacle, home abode; womb, uterus, vulva, vagina, female organ of generation." The *liṅga* is rarely



**Fig.2. Śiva Linga**

seen without the *yoni*, and it is the *two together* which symbolize Śiva's inherent power—his gender potential—namely, procreation. We shall have occasion to return to how Śiva's presence and potency are expressed by the fundamental sexual identities merged into one guise [*linga*] when later we probe the esoteric "meaning" of the upright placement of the *linga*-shaft on its pedestal.

The *linga* and its associated *yoni* are widely dispersed throughout the subcontinent in both time and space. Examples of phallic shafts and ring-stones strikingly like those known today have been unearthed by archeologists digging at sites exposing the most remote past of Indic civilization; those finds are dated to the fourth and third millenia B.C.E. and appear to have been, even then, remarkably diffused in the Indus Valley Civilization's broad sweep. The later, but still ancient, sages of the Vedas spoke disparagingly of those who treated the phallus as their deity [*śiśnadeva*]. And *lingas* dating back many centuries and displaying various sizes and shapes have been discovered—sometimes with, sometimes without, a base—in the north, south, east and west of India. Some of those worshipped in Śiva temples today are said to have originated in ancient times; some *lingas* in such temples are even declared to be eternal [*svāyambhuva*].

In terms of its most obvious characteristic, the rising shaft, there are many different styles of *lingas*. The major division distinguishes between "found" stones of vaguely phallic shape, called *bāṇa-lingas*, and man-made monoliths, called *mānuṣa-lingas*. The former are egg-shaped pieces of quartz said to be peculiar to the Narmada River, but in fact look-alikes of which are found elsewhere. These natural, "found" *bāṇa-lingas* are believed to be so replete with Śiva's presence and potency they need no sanctification rites to render them acceptable for worship—they may be worshipped immediately as Śiva. Accordingly, they are particularly valued as objects for use in devotions at home-shrines (*vide* essay on *śālagrāma*-stones found elsewhere in this volume). The *mānuṣa-lingas*, because fashioned by human hands, require elaborate purificatory



rites before they may be utilized for purposes of worshipping Śiva. These are of various sizes ranging from one or two inches overall to more than ten feet in height. Styles of *liṅga*-shafts range from smooth, polished columns to profusely decorated eminences. Some shafts are incised, some fluted, some faceted, some shown in association with serpentine *nāgas* [q.v.], some with one or more faces emerging from the flank or from the tip [*mukha-liṅga*], and some slit to reveal in relief a depiction of an incarnate lord [*liṅgodbhavamūrti*]. Priapic miniatures are carried as talismans by members of the sect called *Liṅgāyats*,<sup>1</sup> and temporary mounds of powder, earth or dung are occasionally used in particular ritual settings.

In our line-drawing (Fig. 2) we see a typical *liṅga* represented. Since there is no detail in the rendering to give us a sense of proportionate measurement, we may assume its size may range from an object small enough to hold in the palm of the hand to something monumental enough to dwarf in its shadow the measure of a man. The smaller size would appropriately find a place on domestic *pūjā*-shelves; a two or three feet *liṅga* would be what might be found in the *sanctum sanctorum* of a typical temple dedicated to Śiva. The ringed tiers and flanges of the round pedestal [*yonī*] culminate in a disc-like, circular surface surrounded by a lip-like edge. From the circular surface stretches perpendicularly the *liṅga*-shaft and from the lip-like, edge extends laterally a projection called the *yonī-mukha*. The latter projection allows for drainage of liquids which are poured over the shaft and which libations having touched the presence of the divine are sanctified beyond measure. The shiny, black shaft issuing from the *yonī*-base surges upward in a thrust of power. It is decorated with the three horizontal lines [*tripuṇḍra*], made from a paste of *vibhūti*-ashes sacred to Śiva, which mark identifies it as a Śaivite cultic object.

We have already commented on the necessity to see the "sign" of the *liṅga* as a conjunction of two entities. The emblem of Śiva's presence and power is not merely the shaft alone, but the shaft [*liṅga*]

positioned erect and upright, penetrating through its round base [*yoni*]. The two are structurally one. If one prefers to perceive this union at the secondary level of phallic and womb motifs, it is male and female principles meeting and mixing, conjoining and completing one another. The two, then, are esoterically one. The theme of opposites meeting and resolving into creative coexistence is one found expressed time and again, echoed at various intensities, in Śiva mythology and iconography. Here we have it stated at its most basic articulation.

Yet, however else one "sees" the *linga*-shaft, it must never be understood as a static symbol. On the contrary it is to be perceived as ever stretching, striving, expanding its bounds. The *linga*-shaft as a dynamic symbol of ever-expanding form, as potential which is ever straining upward for realization, is surely part of the basic understanding of Śiva in faith and in mythology. One may venture to guess that few Hindus are unaware, as they contemplate the tensed lithic shape, of the story of the crucial, primeval event which proved once and for all Śiva's superiority over the other gods, Brahmā and Viṣṇu. The story goes like this:

Once upon a time, when creation was just completed, Brahmā basked in the soft light of his own effulgent self-knowledge, and thought *himself* to be author of all things in the universe and beyond. Meanwhile, Viṣṇu slumbered on the ocean of existence and half-hidden in the mystery of his own shadowy darkness, dreamed the dream of creation in which *he* played the role of generator. There came a time when the aureole and the shadow met, whereupon the glowing Brahmā and the dusky Viṣṇu stood face to face. A quarrel immediately broke out between them concerning which one was, in fact, the greater. As each hurled at the other his own list of accomplishments, there appeared between them a huge column bright with the fire of countless brilliant flames blazing from it.

Lost in amazement the two *devas* forgot their argument. They found themselves irresistibly drawn to discover the source and extent, the

meaning and the measure of this fiery pillar. Brahmā assumed the shape of a *hamsa*-swan and flew up into the firmament to find the top of the towering eminence; Viṣṇu took the form of a boar and with his snout began to burrow into the ground to find the root of the ever-expanding energy. Try as they might with all their efforts neither could reach the end they sought. Each was humiliated and, returning to the place where both started, began to praise the pillar of fire which they now knew to be greater than anything their minds had ever conceived.

Pleased by their prayers the column burst open to reveal the figure of Śiva, lord of creatures, standing erect and powerful. Brahmā and Viṣṇu recognized him immediately as their master, and understood that the fiery pillar was not only the eternal flame that consumes all things but also the vibrant and feverish source of reproductive nature perpetually creating anew after repeated cycles of destruction. And they beheld with wonder within the flame the mysterious form of the master of all things material and immaterial.

The smaller sized *linga*-forms used in domestic worship are honored daily, usually in the morning by the eldest married male of the family. The object of his devotions is most likely something that was handed down to him by his father, and in turn something his father had inherited as his patrimony. Before approaching the cupboard or shrine where it is kept, the worshipper will have bathed and prepared himself mentally for the sacred task ahead of him by a period of meditation. Three items are indispensable to him in what follows, sanctified water, *vibhūti*-ashes, and *bilva*-leaves. The latter are traditionally associated with Śiva-worship in the same way that *tulasī* [q.v.] is with the worship of Viṣṇu. The worshipper may also use milk and other liquids, as well as flowers and fruit-offerings, in his *pūjā*. Once initiated, the devotions may extend from ten or fifteen minutes up to an hour or longer. The length of the period of morning worship depends not only on the punctiliousness with which the householder performs his *pūjā* to the *linga*-presence but also on what other deities he may honor additionally as part of

his daily duties (e.g., the Goddess, other deities like Gaṇapati and/or saints like Śaṅkara or Satya Sai Baba and/or powers like the *nāgas*). The liquids used in libations are collected, once *pūjā* is over, and offered to family members as *prasāda* to sip; some of the *bilva*-leaves and *vibhūti*-ash used will also be distributed to family members, the former to be put over the ear of a man or in the hair of a woman, the latter to be used as a mark on the forehead. In the South there does not seem to be the same freedom accorded to women to worship the *linga* directly themselves as is evident in north Indian custom.

At temples where the *linga*-form is the central presence in the *sanctum sanctorum*, more elaborate rituals are performed by priests who have been initiated into the arcane traditions of Śiva worship after long training. The services to the *linga* are performed several times during the day, starting in the early morning hours. Especially elaborate rites are conducted at noon [*uccakāla*] and at dusk [*pradoṣa*]. In all of these water, *vibhūti*-ashes and *bilva*-leaves figure prominently. Additionally, of course, other liquids (milk, ghee, honey, scented waters, etc.) may be used, as also flowers of various, specified kinds and colors. A growing practice in Śiva temples, frowned upon by the orthoprax community as condemned by ancient texts, is to distribute the food-offerings advanced to the deity to the laypersons who wait outside the sanctum doors. While it has been for long an accepted practice in Viṣṇu temples to distribute the deity's *naivedya*-food-stuffs as *prasāda* to the faithful, it is an innovation of recent decades in south Indian Śaiva establishments to do so. Accordingly, in both Śiva-ite and Viṣṇu-ite temples one will nowadays find boards posted prominently with prices assigned to various food-stuffs available as "left-overs" from divine offices—a fixed menu of *prasāda* prices.

An interesting cultic feature in Śiva temples where the *linga* is worshipped is that the shaft is often kept perpetually wet. This is accomplished by suspending above the *linga*-installation a vessel, called a *dhārāpātra*, from which water constantly drips. It must also be pointed out that the *Śiva-linga* in the main shrine of many prominent Śiva-ite temples

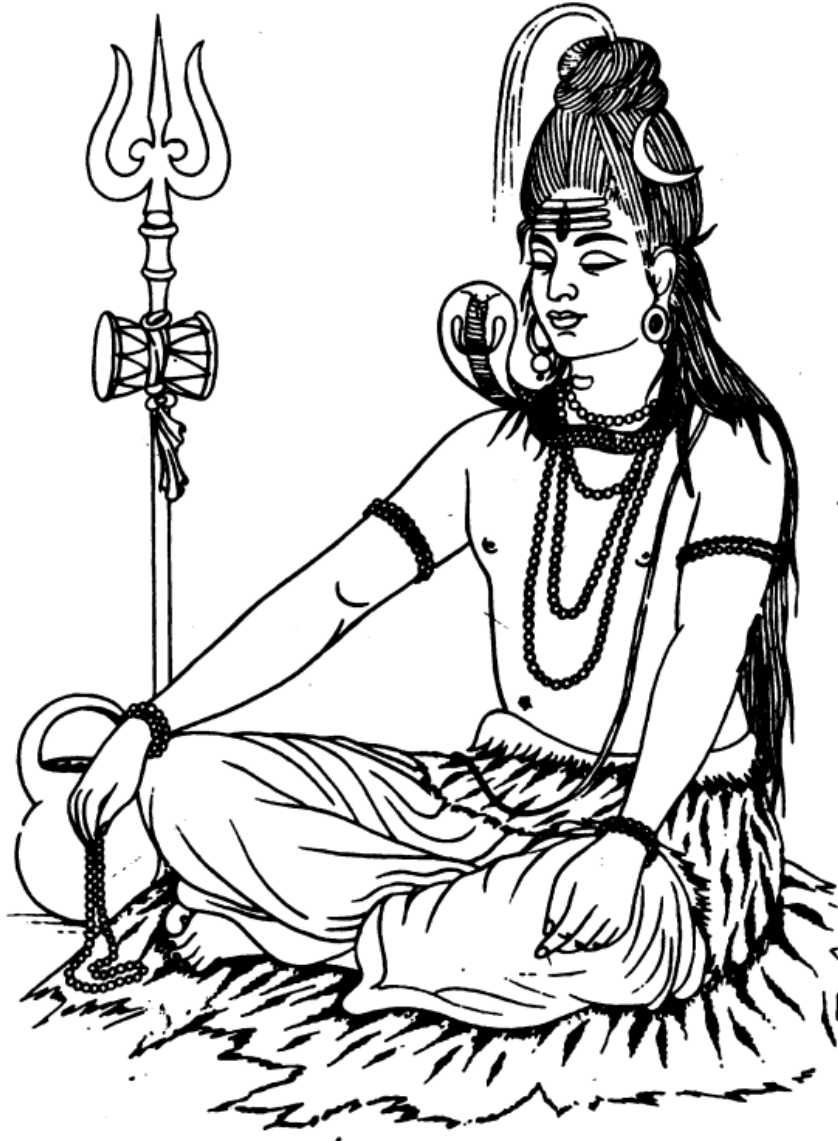
is rarely left unadorned. In fact in many places it is virtually impossible to see the actual *linga* underneath the decorative plaques of gold and silver, the gem-studded fittings, the brocaded garments, and the floral decorations.

In both temples and domestic worship, Mondays and Thursdays are days on which offerings to Śiva are made more elaborately than at other times. Beyond these days, each month on the thirteenth evening of the waning phase of the moon, an observance called "*Māsaśivarātri*," is celebrated. At that time, but on a smaller scale, what is done once a year in the dark half of the month Māgha (January-February) on "*Mahāśivarātri*," is repeated. At homes this is done fairly modestly, while in Śiva temples it is done more grandly. The main features of both the monthly and annual "Night for Śiva" [*rātri*, "night"] are an all-night vigil during which all efforts by devotees are made to concentrate on Śiva's mystery to the exclusion of all other thoughts, preceded by a period of fasting, and followed by an elaborate cycle of liturgies directed to the *Śiva-linga*. It is believed that great merit accrues to one who observes the fast, and that the merit of one who keeps vigil throughout the night without dozing is sure to result in *mokṣa* or liberation from rebirth—especially for those who do these things during the month of Māgha. Consequently, as a community service to those who wish to keep awake and alert during *Mahāśivarātri*, in places like Madras and Hyderabad, All-India Radio schedules all-night broadcasts of religious programs, movie-houses schedule midnight to morning features at reduced prices, and even television offers late, and late-late, shows of old movies bearing on Śiva themes.

The faith of Śiva-ites through the centuries has declared that *Śiva-lingas* are, in truth, manifestations of earth, water, fire, air, ether, and of Śiva's own self [*prthivī*, *ap* and/or *jala*, *tejas*, *vāyu*, *ākāśa*, and *ātman*]. Accordingly, one finds in the South that certain Śiva temples follow this pan-Indian classification scheme by averring that *Śiva-lingas* housed at particular places manifest one or another of those elemental types.

Six of the more important places of Śiva-ite pilgrimage in the South, then, may be named in association with each of the types as illustration: the Rāmanātha Temple at Rāmeśvaram, where the textured *liṅga* is said to resemble the earth [*prthivī*] of which it is a manifestation; the Śiva Temple at Tiruvāṇṇaikkāval in the state of Tamil Nadu, where the *liṅga* is submerged in water,<sup>2</sup> which element it is said to represent; the Aruṇācaleśvara Temple at Tiruvāṇṇāmalai in the state of Tamil Nadu, where the *liṅga* is associated with light so subtle it is invisible to ordinary vision yet which ever attracts the watchful to it; the Śrīkālahastīśvara Temple at Kālahasti in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where the *liṅga* is always aerated by a mysterious ventilation said to issue from the stone itself; the Naṭarāja Temple at Chidambaram in the state of Tamil Nadu, where so ethereal is the presence of the *liṅga* in its dark chamber that it is difficult to see at all; and the Mahābaleśvara Temple at Gokarn in the state of Karnataka, where the asymmetrical *liṅga* implanted there in the ground remains as immovable as is Śiva himself when in meditation.

As a "sign" of Śiva's presence—its primary function—the *liṅga*, wherever it may be found, indicates that the Lord in all his potential is there. The lithic form may stand splendidly isolated surrounded only by the mystic aura of faith; or, it may stand close to an iconic approximation of Śiva's being, an image in his Dancing Form, or one of his many, other modes of manifestation. The fact is, his "sign" is omnipresent—there is not a Śiva temple in the South which does not proclaim his presence somewhere or other, often many times over and again, by the shaped column of a Śiva-*liṅga*.



**Fig.3. Śiva Mahāyogin**



## Śiva-Mahāyogin

Through the ages Indian civilization has presented two diametrically opposed models for the good life. In terms of metaphors these can be expressed in terms of "the village" and "the forest." In terms of ideal figures these are depicted as "the family man" and "the renunciate," or solitary ascetic. The classical Hindu tradition sought to show that the two modes of life were successive stages [*āśramas*]<sup>3</sup> in a fully realized person's career. In fact, however, the two models have always been, and remain, in tension one with the other. Even in the mythology of Śiva there is an uneasy ambiance surrounding the hero's career in which both modes of exemplary life are affirmed—the one is always fraught with strife, the other ends in chaos. In either case the truth seems to be that an exclusive emphasis on one is not enough: somehow both must coalesce and coexist. The resolution of opposites is something we will have occasion to comment upon elsewhere in this volume in regard to Śiva, for example, when we look at Śiva as the model householder in his guise as "Somāskanda" [*q.v.*]. Here we look at him as the ascetic *par excellence*, as *Śiva-mahāyogin* ("Śiva, the Great Yogin").

It must be stated at the outset, however, that while almost all the other figures depicted and described in this volume receive worship in some form or another, *Śiva-mahāyogin* is not given homage at all in the same ways. He is not worshipped as the central image in a temple—so far as we know—any place in south India. Figures of Śiva as an ascetic are found in niches and in sculptural programs along temple corridors and courtyards, but that presence is not to be confused with the one depicted here.<sup>4</sup> Nor are three-dimensional icons of *Śiva-mahāyogin* often seen in domestic shrines. Yet it is in the home where he is most typically found—as the colorful subject of a vivid wall-calendar, or as a calm personality framed and hung on the wall of a traditional living room. As such, he is not accorded adoration so much as he

affords inspiration. But it is because he is so often found in Hindu homes today—not just in Śaivite homes but in others as well—which makes his depiction in this guise remarkable, his inclusion in this book required.

Pictures of seated figures in the familiar cross-legged position are a staple of the inventory of Indian illustrations. Seals found in the archeological sites of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization prove that the pose was already idiomatic in the fourth and third millennia B.C.E. Later on it was a style adopted by both Buddhist and Jain artists to indicate the ascetic personality valued and cultivated in their movements. Throughout the long development of Hindu ideology the figure of the seated sage, the meditating *muni*, and the tranquil *tapasvin* has impressed the imagination, evoked emulation. Some of the representations are awesome in the intensity of commitment to self-abnegation that is portrayed. Others have softened the image so that it is scarcely more than a sweet sobriety that is suggested as has been the case in the portrayal of Śiva-*mahāyogin* in the popular “calendar art” form so ubiquitous throughout India in recent decades. Our own line-drawing is not without traces of such trivialization, and that was an intentional appropriation. For, it is such sentimentalized versions of Śiva, the seated ascetic, which are most often found on the walls of south Indian homes.

In reference to the line-drawing (Fig. 3) of the seated *Mahāyogin*, we shall follow conventional practice of describing the iconographic features by starting at the bottom of the deity’s depiction and moving upward. The great yogin is seated on a tigerskin. That is a typical *āsana*-seat for an ascetic figure whose purpose it is to quell animal impulses; it also is symbolic of the “forest” vocation he follows. The posture in which he sits—cross-legged, arms extended to each knee—is reminiscent of the austere *padmāsana*-position (lotus-sitting attitude, in which both legs are crossed and the feet are brought to rest on the opposite thighs). In some depictions, but not here, the seated *Mahāyogin* is supported by a traditional *yoga-daṇḍa*, a crutch-like instrument propped under the

left arm. In ancient renderings as well as in those deriving from the tantric traditions, *Śiva-mahāyogin* is often shown naked [*nagna*], even ithyphallic, covered only by *vibhūti*-ashes. Here, however, he is more modestly depicted wearing a dhotī and girdled by another tigerskin. He also wears *rudrākṣa*-beads<sup>5</sup> at his wrists, biceps and neck. Although he also holds a "rosary" of *rudrākṣa*-beads in his right hand, it would appear that these as well as the more obviously decorative strands are to be construed as but "garlands" complementary to the main task in which he is engaged. At his neck is also a coiled *nāga* [q.v.], a motif often reiterated in other portraits by showing coiled serpents around his biceps also. The subtle smear shown on his throat—a detail not always shown in modern drawings—points to his identity also as "Nīlakaṇṭha."<sup>6</sup> Looping over his left shoulder and down his body around his right side is the *upavīta*-cord.

Framing his face on either side are earrings, one symbolic of what a man normally wears, the other of what a woman wears. His eyes are lowered in meditation, indicative of the stage of introverted yogic meditation known technically as *pratyāhāra*. The forehead bears the *tripundra*-mark which has become a specific sectarian sign of the Śaiva cult. Cutting through the three lines vertically is the symbol of his third eye, closed during the period when creation is sustained. This detail is an extremely important one in Śaiva mythology and theology, and it accounts for several other names by which this "three-eyed" deity is known (e.g., "Trineta," "Trinayana," "Tryambaka," "Phālānetra," "Lalāṭalocana," etc.). His hair is unkempt. It falls over his shoulders in snarls and tangles. Where it has been gathered into a knot on top, we see a crescent moon which, among other things, suggests the greatness of this god whose dark tresses are as expansive as the sky at night, and which iconographic detail is picked up in his names "Candraśekhara," "Śaśāṅkaśekhara," "Gaganakeśa," "Abhrakeśa," "Vyomakeśa," etc. Continuing along the lines of this celestial imagery we note spouting from his top-knot a stream of water, reflecting the story of the celestial origin of the Ganges, its precipitous plunge to earth from the

heavens, its deflection by his intervention, and its subsequent release by his boundless grace.

The accoutrement of an ascetic, the *kamaṇḍalu*-pitcher is on the ground close to his right side. In a plane behind him is relegated his powerful trident [*triśūla*], to which is tied his *ḍamaru*-drum.

To be sure, each and every detail of this popular picture has a significance beyond the obvious. A few of these "meanings" may be alluded to in order to reveal something of the fascination that this figure holds for those who contemplate it. For example, the tigerskin(s) point(s) to his dominating position as the "Lord of Beasts" [*paśupati*]<sup>7</sup>—an identity reinforced, as here, by the presence of the *nāga* and, in other depictions, by that of his bull-*vāhana* Nandī and other fauna of the wild.<sup>7</sup> The *vyāghracarma*-tigerskin, symbol of carnal impulses under control, is also found in depictions of such ascetic figures as Śaṅkara [q.v.] and has been affected by other ascetics, historical and contemporary, as an emblem of their dedication. The *nāga* at the neck represents not only the *kuṇḍalini*-power raised to its fullest extent by the successful exponent of *laya-yoga*, but also is a familiar symbol for one who has tamed time. The serpent, which sloughs off its skin at regular intervals in order to continue life in a more fully developed stage, is an apt indicator not only of the course of time [*saṁsāra*], entailing many rebirths, but also of the warps of time folding in on one another when seen from a superior perspective.

Or, for further examples, the two earrings indicate not only the coalescence into one personality of male and female characteristics and polar qualities—note his hermaphroditic countenance in general—but refer at an even more esoteric level to two epistemological methods leading to intuitive knowledge, *Sāṁkhya* and *Yoga/jñāna* and *vijñāna/para* and *apara*. The wisdom of this pensive figure is further emphasized by the symbolism of the three eyes, reputed to ken past, present and future. The third eye in the forehead, closed, suggests the utter control which inheres in one who has acquired great stores of wisdom and *tapas*. Both

these powers are imaged as bright and hot. It is significant that one of the few times Śiva's third eye opens is when according to Śaiva mythology, he uses its laser-like beam to cut down Manmatha ("Kāma"), the carnal tempter and firebrand who perturbed him in his prolonged penance (he fought fire with fire), an event described in our essay on "*Somāskanda*" [q.v.].

As for his hair, so replete with symbolism, if the upper masses stand for the broad celestial expanse of the sky, the fall downward in snarls and tangles represents in some sense the worldly condition. The piled coiffure atop the cranium suggests the hidden wisdom concentrated there, a feature mediated iconographically in Buddhist art by the rendition of an *uṣṇīṣa*-protuberance. The spurting water, in addition to its reference to the Ganges, may also be seen as a bursting forth of the wisdom, energy, and flowing grace from the Master of All Creatures. The crescent moon, in turn, suggests the periodic tides which may dictate the flow of power, energy and grace to his devotees, although it is also, of course, an ancient symbol for time and its passage, and thus complements the symbolism of the *nāga* already alluded. Likewise, the drum.

For, the drum [*ḍamaru*] is a favorite symbol in Śaiva iconography as well as elsewhere in Hindu mythology for the tempo of the passing seasons, celestial cycles and cosmic ages. It is, here, set aside, suspended in silence, on the shaft of the All-Conquerer. That the drum resonates with other meanings is clear from its contextual meaning as an instrument held and played by Śiva in his more dynamic aspect as the dancing Naṭarāja [q.v.].

As for the spear, at its most obvious level it is an instrument which substitutes in its upright position and penetrating power for his life-giving *liṅga* [q.v.]. At a more subtle level of interpretation it is, literally, his *śakti*—a word which has the double meaning of referring at once to his trident-spear as "weapon," symbol of his redeeming power, and to his always-present "consort," symbol of his regenerative power. At an even more subtle level, the trident with its three prongs enunciates



**Fig. 4. Natarāja**

Śiva's triune power to control with one fell swoop the cosmic functions of creation [*śṛṣṭi*], preservation [*sthiti*], and dissolution [*saṃhāra*].<sup>8</sup>

Not all the preceding interpretations are accessible to the average Śaiva layperson by any means. On the other hand, many sophisticated Śaivas will "see" in the figure of the Great Yogin even more "meanings" than have so far been hinted at. By and large, to the Śaivite layman the figure of *Śiva-mahāyogin* represents, at the very least, a potential within his own daily life for the practice of discipline [*yoga*]. The practice of yoga, as such, takes many forms, and those who pursue its practice personify many different levels of intention and commitment to its methodologies. This variety of accommodations to a regularization of "discipline" has evidently been a part of the Indian scene since earliest times, for even the ancient exposition of the eight "Stages" of Yoga by Patañjali<sup>9</sup> was a reformulation and systematization of diverse practices and views held in his own times. Today, just as there has ever been in Indian religious life, there are various formulations and recommendations for what yogic discipline is which leads to the realization of the good life. To the average Śaiva it is enough to know, perhaps, that it is possible to practise some kind of meditation and introverted concentration in the midst of daily life. Accordingly, he is inspired by the vision of *Śiva-mahāyogin* to compose himself however briefly, to set aside temporarily the commitments of family and community, and to withdraw into solitude for a little while to glimpse that goal the Great Yogin himself evidently knew.

#### 4

### **Śiva-Naṭarāja : The Dancing God**

According to a legend preserved in several Tamil accounts, the perpetual presence of Naṭarāja (the "Lord of the Dance") at Chidambaram came



about as a boon to those who long ago witnessed his power at play. One version of the legend states that once upon a time Śiva went to meet the gods and holy men gathered in the ageless golden hall of Chidambaram's temple. When he arrived in the *sabhā* ("place of assembly"), he was told that the surrounding forests were inhabited by groups of Mīmāṃsaka sages teaching heretical doctrines. Those sages, he was told, were atheists who declared there was no need to resort to gods. They preached that one could achieve any end desired simply by performing certain rituals in specified ways. Indeed, they were at that very moment all gathered together in a clearing where they had kindled a great sacrificial fire. Hearing this, Śiva left the golden *sabhā* and, followed by the assembly of gods and holy men, marched straight to where the heretics stood. He began to berate their practices and to refute their arguments. This only infuriated the sages. He persisted by pressing his points. They wheeled around to the blazing fire and, joining together in incantation, produced from it a fierce tiger which exceeded in strength all the beasts of the shadowy jungle. The tiger lunged at Śiva, but the unperturbable lord of the beasts [*paśupati*] seized it in mid-air, with his little finger stripped off its skin, and calmly placed the hide around his hips for a loin cloth. A second time the sages turned to their sacrificial firepit, and this time they conjured from it a venomous snake. They set that denizen of the lower darkness upon Śiva, who merely flicked it to the finger of one of his free hands where it coiled itself docilely as a decoration. As the gods and holy men around him applauded his effortless acts, a smile wreathed the great god's face and he began to dance. But the pernicious heretics were not through yet. A third time they took recourse to their ways and produced from the flames a demonic dwarf who hailed from the clouded oblivion of their veiled minds. He loped toward the dancing deity on a mission of mischief but was stopped dead in his tracks. For, the deity's dance had become increasingly energetic and, in a flurry of movement, his right foot fell onto the dwarf's back and snapped it. With their last violent commission deployed, the misguided sages



scattered. The gods and the holy men who had witnessed it all begged the gyrating lord who still rocketed over the writhing body of the demon to return with them to the *sabhā* and there remain forever in the abandon of his wondrous dance. He granted them their boon, and that is why to this day he may be seen there even as the gods and holy men of yore saw him.

There are many depictions of Śiva as a dancing deity.<sup>10</sup> But the ones which are of decisive significance for south India are those which clearly derive from the image housed at the Chidambaram temple. So important is that place, and the manifestation of Śiva shown there, that it is often referred to as the "center of the universe."

Our line-drawing (Fig. 4), while not a replica of the image at Chidambaram, certainly reflects its main impression as well as many of its important details. The main impression one gets upon viewing any image of Naṭarāja, especially Chidambaram Naṭarāja, is of course one of dynamic energy. In contradistinction to the static form of *Śiva-mahāyogin* [q.v.], where the main direction of his attention seems turned inward, the form of the same deity as *Śiva-naṭarāja* presents a picture of his force diffused in all directions. That is quite in keeping with a god whose presence pervades all places. Arms reaching, leg extended, hair flying—Naṭarāja is the very picture of active, radiating power.

Typically, Naṭarāja's legs are shown in the so-called "*nāṭyasthāna*"-pose, the right foot supporting his weight, the left foot lifted crosswise and held in mid-air. He wears the tigerskin reminiscent of the feat attributed to him in the legend and which is, in any case, a symbol of strength both physical and spiritual. Around his body there appear two strings, one just below the waist called a "*kaṭisūtra*" (Tamil: "*aṇṇā-kayir*"), and the *upavīta*-cord looping down from his left shoulder. Both of these may be construed to signify that in the eyes of his worshippers, at least, he is of the "twice-born" [*dvija*] community; for, both of these are traces of brāhmanic rites known as *saṁskāras* performed as part of the traditional life-cycle celebrations. He also wears

flower garlands at the ankles, wrists, biceps and neck. Bells may sometimes substitute for the flowers at the ankles, and appear also at the calf.

Images of the dancing Śiva sometimes have up to 16 arms. But the Chidambaram Naṭarāja has four. His lower right hand is extended in the "*abhaya*" ("fear not") gesture, as if to pacify any spectator of his dance who does not understand its true meaning. Attached also to the little finger of the same hand is the decorative serpent mentioned in the legend. The upper right arm holds a *ḍamaru*-drum, the sound of which attracts the attention of all to witness his wondrous dance. Its beat also reflects the rhythm of time itself. This drum is a recurrent element of Śaiva iconography and has already been commented upon in relation to its appearance behind Śiva-mahāyogin [q.v.]. His upper left hand holds a handful of fire, a powerful symbol with multilevel references. For example, it must certainly refer to the fire of sacrificial *yajñas* and *yāgas*; the fact that Śiva holds the fire within his hand suggests that he is the sum of the sacrifices. The fire must surely also call to mind his associations with the cremation ground and his role as destroyer; hence it probably also refers to the final fire of consummation at the times of the destruction of corpse and cosmos. Other references easily suggest themselves to sensitive viewers. In many renditions of the dancing Śiva, including the Chidambaram Naṭarāja, the flame-motif is reiterated in the presence of fiery aureole which, in turn, may represent the orb of creation wherein Śiva's dance is staged. His lower left hand declines in a deliberate direction toward the upraised left foot, giving to that the prominence it deserves. For, while the weight of his right foot damages the dwarf, the left foot ascends gracefully to foretell the final, unfettered freedom which awaits in the higher realms of consciousness the fortunate spectators moved by his mystic dance.

We have already had occasion elsewhere to comment on the mark at his throat, the unmatched earrings, the *tripuṇḍra*-mark on his forehead, and the so-called "third eye" (*vide* essay on "Śiva-mahāyogin," *passim*). As for the smile on his face, that has been accounted for in the legend

and is usually attributed to the sheer joy the god takes in performing his mysterious wonders; another tradition, however, attributes his exhilarated look as well as his frenzied dance to the effect of drugs ingested. A crown—appropriate to the “king” [*rāja*] of the choreography he commands—hides his upper coiffure of hair, but the lower locks are splayed out by the centrifugal force of his reeling. In many depictions the flowing hair is decorated with the crescent moon, with a mermaid effigy (Ganges?)<sup>11</sup>, with *nāgas* or with other celestial, aquatic and subterranean symbols to suggest the lord’s various subtle identities. Some effort is occasionally made by interpreters of Naṭarāja’s iconography to equate the 5, 6, 7 or 11 strands of hair found flowing on either side of his head with the five elements, the six senses, the seven *lokas*, and the eleven orifices of the human body. Suffice here to say that all parts of an imaginatively rendered Naṭarāja image have multiple numbers of references.

At the foot of the Naṭarāja image is the demon already alluded to in the legend. His name in Sanskrit is “Apasmāra,” and in Tamil “Muyalakaṇ,” both of which mean the same thing, “Forgetfulness.” Given the proclivity of many Śaivas to adopt an Advaita Vedānta, non-dual approach to most issues it is not surprising that this dwarf is taken to personify “ignorance” [*avidyā*] at the individual level and “illusion” [*māyā*] at the cosmic level, the effects of which are negated by Śiva’s saving steps. That the demon may also personify the amnesia which makes the devotee too often ignore the presence and power of the divine is also a standard interpretation. The presence of the *nāga* in the dwarf’s hand suggests other, possible significations of the prone figure. In some renditions of the Chidambaram Naṭarāja the dwarf is made to look upward into the smiling face of the god who towers above him, introducing possibilities of interpretation which stress a reciprocal relationship between the superior figure and the prostrate inferior.

The pedestal itself is equipped with hooks to make possible the carriage of the image in festival processions, about which more below. The dish in the line-drawing indicates the omnipresent *vibhūti*-ashes used

in worship of the deity and given as *prasāda* to devotees afterward. It is important to stress, above all, that the image of Nāṭarāja finds its most profound "meaning" within such a context of worship as is here suggested, in which setting only is the Enlivening Presence of the Lord to be glimpsed by those who approach him in awe and reverence.

No essay on the Dancing Śiva would be complete without notice of an authoritative interpretation of his stance championed by scholastics within the system since at least the time of the seventeenth century Śaiva Siddhānta philosopher, Appayya Dīkṣita. In this, the great god's power is five-fold: he directs creation [*śṛṣṭi*], he attends to creation's maintenance [*sthiti*], he dictates its periodic destruction [*saṃhāra*], he withdraws himself occasionally into obscurity [*tirobhāva*], and he also takes his devotees to himself by his amazing grace [*anugraha*]. Accordingly, the Dancing Deity is regarded to demonstrate iconographically each of these five functions [*pañcakṛtya*].

Nor would it be proper to speak of the Chidambaram Nāṭarāja without alluding to the mystic import also attached within the Śaiva community to that "place." For, while it is also a town some 200 miles south of Madras city and just inland a bit—where the famous Nāṭarāja Temple with its "ageless" golden *sabhā* is in fact to be found—it is construed also to be within each person. In most individuals it is a realm unexplored, but nonetheless as close to them as their heart. The first element of the word "Chidambaram" is said to represent *chid*, "consciousness," while *ambara* translates as "ethereal space," and is equated with the cavity of the heart spoken of in the Upaniṣads as the abode of the Supreme Being. Thus Śiva's divine dance, all the functions he supervises, even the dwarfish presence he annihilates—these are all to be understood existentially, each and all has a psychic reference.

As for Chidambaram the geographic town, this then becomes a site where Śiva's gracious presence may be viewed concretely, where the truth of his divine dance there becomes an external object for contemplation and celebration. Thus multitudes of devotees of Śiva flock to this town

and its ancient temple, especially at the two times each year when the image of the dancing god (and his consort known there as Śivakāmasundarī, or simply as Śivakāmī) is taken in procession out from its golden sanctuary into the streets. In the month of *Jyeṣṭha* (May-June), as also in the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December), there is a ten-day festival featuring this procession on the ninth day and followed by a day of *darśana* to devotees on the tenth day in the 1000-pillared pavilion.<sup>12</sup> The earlier festival in summer commemorates the marriage of the Lord Śiva to Pārvatī [q.v.]. The latter festival in winter recalls the time when Śiva went to the golden *sabhā* to stay, the incident already narrated in the legend at the beginning of this essay.

In order to understand better the worship of Naṭarāja in domestic shrines throughout the South we must know still more about the worship conducted at Chidambaram. For, what is done at Chidambaram is replicated on a much smaller scale at home. As for the daily praises addressed to Naṭarāja there in his golden *sanctum sanctorum*, these are attended to by specially trained, professional priests. They approach the Lord's presence several times a day to conduct elaborate rituals of worship. These rites utilize water and other liquids for libations, *vibhūti*-ashes and colored powders for decorations, lighted lamps which are waved in front of the deity at various junctures of the liturgies, offerings of cooked and uncooked food, as well as of flowers and *bilva*-leaves. All this is done to the accompaniment of appropriate *mantras* and of devotional songs.<sup>13</sup> When in wintertime the special days set aside for recalling Naṭarāja's first performance at Chidambaram are celebrated, in addition to all the other preparations which are part of a 10-day festival cycle, there is also a one-day fast. This comes on a day marked by the appearance of the *ārdrā-nakṣatra*, an asterism believed to be sacred to Śiva. The wintertime celebrations are so scheduled that this fast day invariably falls on the ninth day of the festival cycle. The tenth and last day, in addition to the *darśana* already mentioned, also see the preparation and distribution to devotees of a special, sweet

cooked rice-pudding called "*kaḷi*." This is a great favorite of all who go to Chidambaram.

While hundreds of thousands come to Chidambaram to worship Naṭarāja in his golden shrine there, millions more file to local Śiva temples in their own communities. Some of these temples may be dedicated to Naṭarāja as presiding deity, some may display another manifestation of Śiva in the main sanctuary and feature Naṭarāja only in a subsidiary shrine. In any case, worship of Naṭarāja uses as its model the pattern established at Chidambaram.

In the domestic worship of Naṭarāja, Chidambaram also serves as model. But here it is the eldest married male of the household who attends to the daily *pūjā*. And the *pūjā*-rites are done but once a day. Articles used for *pūjā* are much the same as in the temple. The length of the daily service depends upon the variety of offerings made, and the familiarity of the householder with the devotional literature. Days special to Śiva (e.g., *Śivarātri* in January-February) as well as those with special significance to Naṭarāja (e.g., *ārdrā-nakṣatra* in November-December) are celebrated at home, the latter also featuring the preparation of the *kaḷi*-pudding. Samples of the sacred sweet are savored by family members and distributed among friends.

We have already commented that Naṭarāja's most profound "meaning" is to be found in the context of worship. Traces of his presence are to be found in many other places, however. Some of the most beautifully rendered examples of the Naṭarāja-image are to be seen in museums—and not just in India—where, of course, the image is completely isolated from its origins. While his likeness at such places as dance academies is quite legitimate and reasonable, one cannot help but be puzzled by the presence of the cosmic dancer at wedding halls, in hotel lobbies, and on business stationery and visiting cards.

Names given to boys which conjure up the image of the Lord of Chidambaram are: Chidambaram, Chidambaranātha, Chidambarāśvāmī;

Kanakasabhāpati ("Lord of the Golden Assembly Hall"); Kṛttivāsa ("He who is Dressed in Skin"); Kūñcitapāda ("He with the Lifted Leg"); Naṭarāja, Naṭeśa; Ponnambalam (a Tamil name for Chidambaram); Ratnasabhāpati, Sabhāpati, Sabheśa; and Tāṇḍavarāya (a variant for "Lord of the Dance").

## 5

### Śiva-Somāskanda

When he was describing salient aspects of the Hindu way of life to Westerners the mid-20th century philosopher-statesman, S. Radhakrishnan, pointed out that in Hinduism there is little room for bachelors and virgins. Their veneration and acclaim by Hindus is the exception, not the rule. A cursory survey of the figures reviewed in this volume simply confirms Radhakrishnan's observation. In the case of the great lord Śiva, we have the anomaly presented that he is both an exemplary celibate, a *mahāyogin*, and the model husband and householder. That is because as lord of all he is all things personified. It is to his career as householder [*grhastha*] we turn in this brief essay.

There are many modes in myth and icon in which the powerful presence of Śiva is presented in the mellowness of married life. These range all the way from the depiction of his disport in passion with his consort goddess, through their portrayal together as a tenderly affectionate couple, to their presentation as a royal pair enthroned in Kailāsa, to their delineation as fond parents. In the latter case they are sometimes shown with both sons, Gaṇapati [*q.v.*] the elder, and Kumāra [*vide* article in this volume on Muruga] the younger, as well as with an entourage of one or more personal animal-*vāhanas* and other attendants; just as often the group will be reduced to the doting parents with either one or the other of their offsprings. In this essay we utilize a rendition





**Fig.5. Somāskanda**



made popular in south India as far back as the Pallava and Chola times (roughly fifth-ninth, ninth-fourteenth centuries C.E.), a grouping of three figures which unmistakably projects the image of Śiva as husband and father, a presentation known as "*Somāskanda-mūrti*" (the "aspect [of Śiva] with Umā and Skanda"). The name of this grouping is here interpreted to be comprised of the principle elements *sa* ("with") + *umā* (an epithet for Pārvatī in her "mother"-aspect) + *skanda* (an epithet for the younger son of Śiva, here depicted as young, as a "toddler" or "bouncing baby boy"). It should be emphasized that our use of this particular grouping is intended to picture Śiva as the consummate, domesticated spouse, a delineation which complements his presentation elsewhere in this volume as *Śiva-linga* [q.v.], *Śiva-mahāyogin* [q.v.], and as *Śiva-naṭarāja* [q.v.].

An important function of this mode of Śiva as married man, husband and father, then, has already been established. He is, as it were, tamed—he is depicted as composed and equable, no longer straining and striving to contain his seed (nor, for that matter, losing it prematurely!), neither is he awesomely remote and absorbed solely in introverted meditation. Above all, he is seen at home, which is to say, *en famille*, and not in the forests, or with the sages, or competing with darkling powers. But two other functions of this mode also deserve comment at the outset. One, is the explicit effect of this portrait of him with the goddess herself: the presence of the female counterpart to his male essence is no longer treated merely aniconographically as *yoni* or as *śakti*-spear, nor is it simply suggested in unmatched earrings or other iconographic subtleties. The goddess has materialized fully here. The polarities suggested elsewhere in his being are completely manifest now. The other, is that from an anthropologist's point of view and in regard to the phenomenology of religious cults, this pictorial statement, showing Śiva with an aspect of the goddess as well as with the vigorous child-god, illustrates something of the sustaining strength shown in Śiva-ism through the ages, namely its genius to incorporate into its own cult powerful folk motifs. Time

and again it may be demonstrated that Śiva-ism has subsumed into its central structure the substance of indigenous movements. The goddesses of fertility and fecundity, the various hill-gods, theriomorphic entities and lesser powers—these have all been absorbed into the parent Śiva-ite movement at one time or another. Some have even been welcomed (to use a simile not inappropriate to the process) like “members of the family”; others have been given a less prominent place, but one functionally no less significant for that. Simply to name a few of Śiva’s companions or adornments illustrates the point—Devī, Skanda (Kumāra-Subrahmaṇya-Murugaṇ, *etc.*), Gaṇapati, Nandī, and the *nāgas* and/or other wild fauna. So to the perceptive viewer, the picture of *Śiva-somāskanda* presents several particulars pertinent to the presence and power of the great god.

Our line-drawing (Fig. 5) of the *Somāskanda* grouping shows the principals seated on a plinth or pedestal [*pīṭha*, sometimes also referred to as an *āsana*]. Śiva is seated so that the two companion-figures are on his left [*vāma*] side. A differential in proportion among the three suggests their relative importance here. The god and goddess at either end of the depiction are seated in complementary poses, which postures also denote their comfortable, relaxed attitudes [*sukhāsana*; var., *ardhaparyāṅkāśana*]. The figure between them may be viewed as a mediating element between mother and father as child, and between male and female as an asexual infant. Śiva in this depiction is without one of his most characteristic iconographic elements, his spear [*śakti/triśūla*]. But its absence is more than compensated for by the presence of the *śakti*-personified, Umā (or Pārvatī [*q.v.*]).

Śiva is dressed in a dhotī, and wears simple anklets and bracelets along with two somewhat ornate *kaṇṭhikā*-necklaces, elaborate *keyūra*-biceps ornaments, and a simple crown which, incidentally, serves to keep his hair in place. The rest of his ornaments and body decorations are similar to what we have already encountered and identified in his depictions as *Śiva-mahāyogin* and/or as *Śiva-naṭarāja*. He has four arms

here as well. His lower right hand is extended in *abhaya-hasta*, while his upper right hand holds a *ḍamaru*-drum—both of which have been already discussed in regard to his manifestation as the Dancing Deity, Naṭarāja. His two left hands require some attention. The upper left hand holds a *mṛga*-buck deer, symbol not only of masculine animal energy but also of the entire animal world, both of which he holds in control. The bucking attitude may also suggest the tension always evident somewhere however subtly in depictions of Śiva's householder-career, and hinting that the tranquility may be momentarily upset by a sudden lurch.<sup>14</sup> The lower left hand demonstrates what we might call the "*sinhamukha-hasta*." In this, the knuckles represent the upper delineation of a lion's head [*sinha-mukha*], the second and fifth fingers elevated to indicate his ears, while the other fingers curl, fang-like, to suggest a gaping mouth. The index finger and thumb represent the jaws not yet joined in closure. This gesture may be taken in token of the final consummation yet to come. The separated fingers, index and thumb, may simultaneously be understood as two principles in close relation to one another—*īhaloka* ("this world") and *paraloka* ("the world beyond"), *jīva* ("self") and *īśvara* ("god"), and/or Śiva and śakti.

The *devī*-goddess, here Umā, always shown to his left, is normally two-armed. She is here dressed in an elegant sārī, one, as it were, fit for a queen. Her toe-rings denote her position as a married lady. She wears an abundance of other jewelry including anklets, armlets and bracelets, a gem-set *ratnamekhalā*-girdle, several necklaces, earrings and a crown. Among the necklaces must be noted at the base of the throat the all-important *maṅgala-sūtra*, which reiterates the message of her toe-rings, namely, that she is a married lady. The culminating mark in regard to her marital status is the *tilaka*-dot on her forehead. Her right hand is held in the *kaṭaka-hasta* gesture, a pose simulating the ringed neck of a holder for flowers; and, in fact, this pose is also used in some images of the goddess to show her holding within the rounded space a lotus or lotus-bud, the ever-abundant sign of fertility

and fecundity. The left hand declines in the eloquent *varada-hasta*, gesture of her grace and giving; it is a fitting complement to Śiva's *abhaya*-signal, "Fear not!"

The personification of this divine couple's largesse stands between them, Skanda the toddler, their "bouncing baby boy." As he appears there, grasping the peacock-symbol of *māyā*, he presents an apt image for the world and/or the human condition. But at a more concrete level he is the ever-youthful issue of their conjugal union, Kumāra. As such, he is too young even to wear the *upavīta*-cord. Except for some jewelry, he wears only the *kaṭisūtra*, a waistband presented to a child on its tenth day. His youth also calls to mind that he is the younger brother of Gaṇapati [q.v.]; of the two sons identified with Śiva and his spouse, he is the one in Hindu legend remembered to be the more affectionate and attentive to his parents.<sup>15</sup> Although in his later career he is known to leave his parents in anger—and certainly in his representation as Murugaṇ [q.v.] this ever youthful deity takes on an identity independent of Śiva and the mother-goddess—it is not surprising to see him here in this perennially popular portrait.

Icons of Śiva in company with the goddess (sometimes with, sometimes without progeny) are found somewhere or another in virtually every Śiva-ite temple in south India. Where they are in the *sanctum sanctorum* as the main divinities of the institution, they receive *pūjā* from the priests' hands first; where they are found in subsidiary shrines, their turn comes in due course after the deity in the central sanctuary has been served. The matter of what and when the temple offerings will be, has already been addressed in descriptions of Śiva-ite temple worship elsewhere in this volume.

In regard to the perpetual presence of the divine couple—wherever found within the temple precincts—there is a strong sentiment which suffuses the place, according to attitudes held by Śiva's devotees. And, that sentiment is reflected in some of the many names by which a temple is known. "*Devālaya*," "*devagrha*," "*devakula*," and "*devamandira*"

(Sanskrit terms) as well as “*kōyil*” and “*koviḷ*” (Tamil and Telugu terms respectively) all have this in common: the first element refers to the deity, the second element refers to his “house” or “home” or “dwelling place.” The temple, then, is perceived by worshippers of the god with his consort as a house or home; as such, it is a place to go to visit. Not only that, it is a place to go to visit with the familiar affinity one experiences when going to visit the home of one’s own parents. For, after all, Śiva and his spouse are father and mother to all. Hence their presence in their own home, the temple, is sought out with warmth, eagerness, and concern by the devotee. Indeed all the presences within the temple compound take on the congeniality of relatives more or less intimate, more or less distant. When an observer of Hindu ways acknowledges this sentiment, and notes how it shapes the expectations which the average temple-visitor takes to the sacred place, much headway has been made toward a better understanding of Śiva-ite piety.<sup>16</sup>

The presence of Śiva in company with his eternal spouse is very visible on the domestic front as well. Śiva as model householder is quite naturally a devotional object for millions of Śiva-ite householders in their daily worship at their home-shrines. Icons for use in that context are usually small—normally not more than five or six inches in height—and, as in all temple-images too, are normally made of copper, bronze, or *pañcaloha* (“five metals” in an alloy of copper, lead, tin, iron and zinc with sometimes trace elements of gold and silver added) to withstand the liquids used in their continuous ablutions.

This essay will draw to a close by taking note of another range of continuing visibility which Śiva and his consort—perhaps she more than he—occupy at the domestic front. To bring this final perspective into focus requires rehearsing the story of how Śiva made the transition from his hermitic vocation to his identity as householder. The story tells of Kāma’s interruption of Śiva’s penance, and of Pārvatī’s determination to win the erstwhile ascetic as her lord.

According to the most common version of the tale, Śiva the great yogin was seated for some time in deep meditation in the Himalayas. His host, Himavān, had provided his nubile daughter, the tender Pārvatī, to attend the few needs the august ascetic might make known. Śiva rarely roused from his efforts; nonetheless the youthful Pārvatī stood by to be there if needed. Meanwhile, a demon, Tāraka, had gained such eminence that all the celestial hosts were terrorized. They went to Brahmā, their ancient leader, who prophesied that Tāraka could be slain only by the issue of Śiva and the mountain-born Pārvatī (viz., Skanda). The gods deputed Kāmadeva, the god of love, to subvert Śiva's self-restraint. Repairing to the slope where Śiva sat in penance, Kāmadeva magically transformed the desolate promontory into a fragrant garden complete with singing birds. Then he selected his infallible weapon, the flowery arrow called *sammohana* ("infatuation") and shot it straight home to its target, the motionless Śiva. The gods who had gathered watched in fascination for its effect; Pārvatī paused to see what would happen; Kāmadeva, of course, drew nearer to observe the result of his work. Suddenly Śiva stirred. His eyes opened. Just then a zephyr softly fluttered Pārvatī's garment, drawing his attention to her figure. Roused, he grew angry at the disturbance caused to him, his consequent loss of equilibrium. Then he spied the culprit Kāmadeva, blinked open his third eye and, in retribution, instantly burned the love god's body to ashes. Śiva's meditation had irrevocably been disturbed.

But the story does not end there. In the tumult which followed, the great god vanished from the place. Pārvatī, crestfallen, was taken away by her father, Himavān, from the spot where she had waited upon the great god. She found she missed the lord whom she had served so diligently so long. Determined to bring him back, she devised an arduous program of *tapas*. So terrible was it that when her mother heard of the plans of her daughter, just reaching her full bloom, she cried out "O, no!" [*u + mā*],—which is the name by which Pārvatī later came to be called. The penances she practised were some of



the most punishing in the entire repertory of mortification. So severe were they, and so successful was she, that her practices caused her to take on a glow—her formerly dark complexion changed to a pale gold, for which reason many also took to referring to her as “Gaurī” (“shining, brilliant”; “white, bright, yellow”). In due time her uncompromising austerities came to the attention of Śiva who, still agitated by the memory of his first sight of her, decided to go in disguise to learn first-hand of her sincerity and success as an ascetic. He came to the mountain where she was and, his identity hid from her, questioned the maiden why she was so severe in her self-denial. She announced it was to bring Śiva back to her side. At that, totally smitten, Śiva assumed his own eternal identity. And, the two lived thereafter together as one, with the birth of Skanda the inevitable, destined consequence.

A mixed message emerges from the preceding story—of two individuals destined for one another, of the inscrutability of infatuation’s effects, of passion parlayed into purpose, and of remote ends being served. It does not add up to much except that the end result of it all is what is celebrated over and again in Śiva-ite circles—the divine couple as ineffable ideal for conjugal commitment. Printed on traditional Śiva-ite wedding invitations will be a logotype of the celestial two. The wedding itself often takes place in the benign view of a plaster cast replica of the pair. Good wishes to newlyweds by elders invoke durability to the marriage by reference to the long happiness experienced by Śiva and Pārvatī. Indeed, in common usage, when struck by admiration of an aged couple, married for long, one may be moved to exclaim, “Ah! they are like Śiva and Pārvatī.” Or, when citing superlatives for rare treasures, one asks rhetorically “And where is there ever to be found a wife like Pārvatī [for fidelity]?”

That this esteem for the divine couple is not limited to the Śiva-ite community alone, we close with reference to a pan-Indian rite, felt to be one of the essentials among the many rituals which surround the celebration of a Hindu wedding. North or south, urban or village



**Fig.6. Devi : Pārvatī**



India, Brahmin or non-Brahmin community, Śiva-ite or other sect, the so-called "*Gaurī-pūjā*" is a must, performed in some form or another. "Gaurī," as we have already learned, is another name for Pārvatī, and denotes not only the light color of the goddess but also the fact that by the time Śiva fatefully visited her she had attained her "fair" marriageable age (the tradition asserts that Pārvatī won Śiva by her penance when she was about sixteen years of age). In this *pūjā*-act, the young bride-to-be makes offerings of flowers, new garments and petitions to an image of "Gaurī," the nubile and still virginal form of Pārvatī. This devotional act may be done by going with members of her family to a nearby shrine of the goddess or, in cases where a proper image of Gaurī has been procured and sanctified, it is done in the presence of her family at the home-shrine or at a specially constructed shrine in the marriage hall where the wedding itself is soon to be performed. This *Gaurī-pūjā* is done in the final hours before the central marriage rites are celebrated in public, and this ritual act done in the privacy of her family culminates the preparations for wedded life by the young girl with the fond help of her family and closest friends. The stress in this *Gaurī-pūjā*—as in so many attitudes brought to the worship of Śiva with his spouse, Pārvatī, by his side—is on family life. In the doing of it there is remarkably revealed something of what is valued as near and dear, what is anticipated as hope, and what is projected as ideal.

## 6

### Devī : Pārvatī

"Pārvatī" is the most common name given to the female figure generally placed next to him when Śiva is shown with his consort, or *śakti*. The name is derived from "mountain" and on the one hand recalls

the legendary origin of the goddess as daughter of the mountain deities Himavān and Menā, and on the other hand suggests her identity as a companion who sits beside Śiva in his mountain home, Kailāsa. The story of Pārvatī's penances on the forbidding slopes of the Himalayas has already been rehearsed in our essay on Śiva as Somāskanda [q.v.]. There it was also suggested that other names which may apply to the maiden of the awesome mountain penances are "Umā" and "Gaurī."

That the consort of Śiva has additional names, each one suggesting subtly different identities, should be clear from a review of the essays identifying the goddess with Kāmākṣī [q.v.] and Mīnākṣī [q.v.]. Those two aliases only serve to suggest some of the many other localized, particular names given to Śiva's spouse. For, she is known elsewhere than at Kāñcīpuram and Madurai as "Śivakāmasundarī" (at Chidambaram, with Naṭarāja [q.v.]), as "Apītakucāmbā" (at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, with Śiva as Aruṇācaleśvara), as "Kāntimatī" (at Tinnevely, with Śiva as Nellaiappan), and as "Kamalāmbikā" (at Tiruvārūr, with Śiva as Tyāgarāja). In addition to such other designations as<sup>17</sup> Śiva's spouse she also has a strong presence in her own right, so strong that she all but eclipses her consort. Some of these identities we have also already looked at in the essays elsewhere in this volume on the *devī* as Durgā [q.v.], as Kālī [q.v.], and as Māriyamman [q.v.]. Those identities, too, only allude to some of the better-known characterizations attached to this goddess. To some of her devotees, she is the sum of all exalted powers mundane and transcendental; and so they call her "Rājarājeśvarī," the benign sovereign who rules over all, the Creatrix of the universe.<sup>18</sup> Or, along the same lines, others recognize her as "Sarvamaṅgalā," the one who embodies all auspiciousness.

Pārvatī has also earned identity through familial ties. "Haimavatī" and "Girijā" both refer to her role as daughter of the mountain king. "Ambā" (Tamil: *Ambāḷ*) and "Ambikā" both refer to her status as a mother, for it was she who nurtured both Gaṇapati [q.v.] and Skanda

(Subrahmaṇya-Kumāra-Murugaṇ [q.v.]) once they were born. And, “Nārāyaṇī” and “Vaiṣṇavī” both refer to the widely held belief that Viṣṇu is her brother.<sup>19</sup>

So, this lady in our line drawing (Fig. 6) is known by many names. She is shown here in a standing pose much as one would find in a processional image of her carried in company with Lord Śiva. As processional images of the goddess are generally two-armed, so is she here. Her right hand demonstrates the “*āhūya-varada-hasta*,” a gesture which at once invites her devotees to approach her and carries with it the promise of boons to be bestowed. Many processional images of *devīs*, Pārvatī included, hold this hand in the more conventional *kaṭaka-hasta*, wherein the hand may or may not hold a lotus. The left arm hangs loosely by her side in what is known as the *lola-hasta* pose. The iconographic details of her dress and decorations tally with what has been described elsewhere for *devī*-figures.

Temple images of the goddess are worshipped alongside Śiva four times a day—at 8 a.m., at noon, at 5.30 p.m., and at 10 p.m. As we have seen in our other treatments of *devī*-figures, Tuesday is uniformly a day when she is given special liturgical attention. In addition, as with other benign forms of the goddess, Friday is also marked by rites in her honor. The fourth Friday of every month, the temple will conduct a “swing”-festival [*ḍolotsava*]; although both she and Śiva are honored in this, its occurrence on Friday suggests it is principally in her honor. On the morning of the ninth day of the waxing phase of the moon each month [“*navamī-tithi*”], a special bath [*abhiṣeka*] is given her, followed by adornment of her icon. All the festivals honoring Śiva (*Śivarātri*, etc.) are also addressed to her by virtue of her position as his consort. The 9-day festival of *Navarātri*, however, which comes during the month of *Āśvina* (September-October), is among Śaivas held to be especially “her” time. For, according to them, Lakṣmī [q.v.], Durgā [q.v.], and Sarasvatī [q.v.] are none other than the Supreme Goddess herself.

Another day in the liturgical year of the Śiva temple which especially honors Pārvatī is the day after the Tamil celebration of Poṅgal near the beginning of *Māgha*-month (January-February). Just as millions of Tamilians go out that day to visit friends and to see them at their homes, so during the evening of that day the processional image of Pārvatī is taken out of the temple and paraded along the streets around the temple so that she might "see" her friends, her devotees. Later in the year she is also taken in procession at the beginning of the month of *Āṣāḍha* (June-July). This outing, inasmuch as it heralds the beginning of the inauspicious half of the year known as "*Dakṣiṇāyana*," no doubt reflects some of the half-forgotten attributes of the goddess as a fertility deity.

The re-enactment of the goddess' marriage to Śiva is invariably one of the most colorful festive cycles in a Śiva temple each year. It is not possible to say that this is done at the same time in all Śaiva temples. The date for the "*Kalyāṇotsava*" seems to be determined by customs which, in turn, may reflect ancient, local folk memories. While the most famous re-enactment of the marriage is done during *Vaiśākha*-month (April-May) in Madurai, it is done in *Phālguna*-month (February-March) at the Kāmākṣī Temple in Kāñcīpuram, at the Sthāṇumalayasvāmi Temple in Śucīndram and at the Kapālīśvara Temple in Madras; in *Jyēṣṭha*-month (May-June) at the Naṭarāja Temple in Chidambaram; in *Āśvina*-month (September-October) at the Ekāmreśvara Temple in Kāñcīpuram and at the Nellaiappaṇ Temple in Tirunelveli.

Pārvatī is worshipped at domestic shrines throughout the South. Sometimes she is worshipped alongside Śiva, her lord; sometimes she is worshipped alone. In not a few instances, in place of an image of the goddess, a "found" stone, lustrous because of its high ore content, is worshipped. This aniconic representation, known as a "*Suvarṇa-mukhī*," has already been described in the context of other stone-form objects used in domestic rites (*vide* our essay on the *Śālagrāma*-stone). Whatever is used, it is in any case kept in a place set apart from the rest

of the household activities. There, the eldest married male in an orthoprax family approaches it daily and offers praises and prayers during the course of libations made to it. Food-offerings are brought before it, however briefly, only after which is it expected that the family will take its own nourishment. Special days to honor the goddess in the home shrines are numerous, and many of these have been indicated in our other essays describing aspects of the *devī*-goddess and her worship.

Almost all of the names of Pārvatī mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are found as female names in south Indian families who pay homage to Śiva and his consort.

## 7

### **Mānikkavācakar**

In addition to the worship of Śiva and his *devī*-consort, south Indian Śaivas also pay homage to a number of saints, or *Śivabhaktas* ("devotees of Śiva"). In this they are no different from the Śrī-vaiṣṇavas and Mādhvas of south India who honor the persons and teachings of various of their own, respective saints, or *Viṣṇubhaktas* ("devotees of Viṣṇu"). In south Indian Śaivism there are 63 legenday figures known as "*Nāyanmārs*" ("Leaders," especially leaders in a spiritual sense), saints whose heroic lives of faith are familiar to most Śaivas, and whose images are to be found in many Śaiva temples throughout the South. During the 10-day major annual festivals of the great Śiva temples of the South, all 63 saints' images are brought out of their shrines into the noisy streets for processions. Although large numbers of viewers do not know one image from another—for, all are two-armed, and they differ from one another mainly by whether they stand or sit and by how they may hold their hands—still, for some of the more traditionally-oriented folk watching the procession there is instant recognition of each figure. Among the 63 *Nāyanmārs* were Brahmins, kings, merchants, several from among



**Fig.7. Māṇikkavācakar**

the lowest castes, at least one outcaste and a couple of women as well as two or more converts from other faiths.

In addition to the 63 *Nāyanmār* figures to be found housed in many south Indian Śiva temples (usually in a vestibule not far from the main shrine), there will also be a grouping of "Four" saints not far from them (often in a place even nearer to the *sanctum sanctorum*). These "Four" are called collectively in Tamil "the *Nālvar*" (literally, "four"). Three of the four figures are drawn from the ranks of the 63 *Nāyanmārs*, while the fourth one is the personality depicted in our line-drawing, the Tamil poet and saint known as Māṇikkavācakar. These "Four" represent to Śaivas four different ways [*mārgas*] of walking through life in the mystic company of the Lord. According to the traditions surrounding the piety accorded the "*Nālvars*," one may conceive of one's relationship with God in terms of acting as the Lord's servant [*dāsamārga*], or in terms of playing the role of a dutiful son to Him [*putramārga*], or in terms of assuming the part of a close and intimate friend [*sahamārga*], or in terms of conceiving of God as *guru* [*sanmārga*]. It was this latter relationship that the saint who is subject of this essay celebrated in his life and teachings.<sup>20</sup>

We do not know what the original name was that was given to Māṇikkavācakar at his birth. The name by which he is now universally known in the South refers to his words or poetic utterances or writings [*vācaka*] which are valued as precious gems [*maṇi/māṇikya*]. He was born in a highly-placed Brahmin family in a village known as Vāḍavūr, not far from the Pāṇḍyan capital city of Madurai. Although traditional accounts try to place the date of his birth as early as the third century C.E., it seems more likely that the three decades during which he lived occurred during the late ninth or early tenth century C.E. As had members of his family before him, so did Māṇikkavācakar find a place in the royal ministry. Several anecdotes have been preserved to give a fresh impression of this young, soul-searching man in service to the Pāṇḍyan king of his time. But what all the stories seem to reinforce is the

picture of an energetic and vigorous young man who was split by conflicting loyalties. On the one hand, it appears he really wanted to serve the secular order; he was good at what he did, and at a fairly young age was entrusted with important state matters. He travelled throughout the kingdom on royal business. On the other hand, he sought also after religious certitude; time and again he was moved to rash religious responses to what others might consider quite ordinary options. He seems to have experienced periods of more and less intense attachment to the Lord Śiva. In the end, he quit (or was relieved of?) his royal post when his inner conflict became too intense for him to endure (or for his royal superior to countenance?).

He never married. We do not know too much about his life as a full-time *Śiva-bhakta*. It appears, however, that he was as prominent in his piety as he was in his role as a royal courtier. On one occasion, he was summoned to serve as spokesman for the official Śaiva position in a debate with a Buddhist delegation from Śrī Lankā—and his eloquence won the day for the Pāṇḍyan house and its faith.

Indeed, his command of words is more than merely legendary. In the three works attributed to him, his literary power is remarkable. His earliest poem, the *Tiruvempāvai*, is a eulogy of the worship during the holy month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December). His much later work, comprised of 400 verses, appears to be the ecstatic utterances of a gifted poet. It is called the *Tirukkōvaiyār*. It contains admirable turns of phrase and poetic conceits which elevate it beyond the range of the normal poetic productions of his period. In it one finds traces of the “bridal mysticism” for which he is justly famous. But it is his other composition, the *Tiruvācakam* of 656 verses, by which he must finally be judged. For, it is a heavily doctrinal presentation of that perspective for which he is most remembered; in it he presents a poignant argument for conceiving of God as the Supreme Teacher and Preceptor. In this he combined both a clear, didactic message with a winsome, moving style. He exploited with expertise the resources of the Tamil



tongue to produce a work of great beauty. It is said that nothing can move a man whose heart does not melt at the melody of Māṇikkavācakar's great *Tiruvācakam*.

He lived to be only 32 years old. We do not know the cause of his death. The hagiological convention is to aver that he was "absorbed into the divine." Whatever happened transpired at the center of southern Śaivism, Chidambaram. There, according to traditional accounts, the saint approached the shrine of the Dancing Lord so dear to him throughout his days, Naṭarāja [q.v.], and "disappeared" by "merging into Him."

Our line drawing of Māṇikkavācakar (Fig. 7) shows him as he is found in image-form in most Śiva temples in the South.<sup>21</sup> He stands bare-footed, dressed in the disarmingly simple garb of a *Śivabhaṭṭa*—not as the minister of state he was for much of his life. His bare feet reiterate his life of renunciation, yet his solid stance on the ground without sandals also simultaneously suggests his closeness to the earth as a worldly man. The fact that he wears an *upavīta*-cord further suggests, in fact, that he never went so far as to enter the stage of *saṁnyāsa* ("renunciant")—for, according to standard Śaiva practice, *saṁnyāsins* remove the *upavīta*-cord upon entering the fourth stage of life. Evidently, Māṇikkavācakar finally resolved the problem of which world he lived in by his death. He does not wear the usual *dhotī*, only a modest cloth to cover his loins. That may or may not be taken as a sign of his unmarried state. The two *rudrākṣamālā*-strands, one around his neck, the other worn as a crown, are often used to signify the presence of a "*jīvanmukta*," or realized saint. The dried berries of the *Eleocarpus ganitrus* serve, for more practical purposes, as a "rosary" in Śaiva piety.

His right hand is held in the "*vyākhyāna*"-*mudrā*, and signifies the exposition of the God-man relationship he provided in his *magnum opus*, the *Tiruvācakam*, extended in his left hand. Sometimes the *pustaka*-manuscript is also draped with *rudrākṣa*-beads. His long ear-lobes reiterate the wisdom he possesses, as in his case they cannot be construed

(as in the case of Rāmānuja [*q.v.*]) to indicate longevity. On his forehead he bears the *tripuṇḍra*-mark witnessing to his identity as a votary of Śiva.

As already noted, he is honored as one of the "Four" of the *Nālvar* figures. He is honored whenever they are, and that would include at the time when they, as members of the larger group of *Nāyanmārs*, are taken in procession (which may account for why there is some uncertainty as to whether or not Māṇikkavācakar is one of the "64" *Nāyanmārs*). But inasmuch as the annual 10-day Brahmotsava-festival during which they are honored at Śiva temples is celebrated at different times of the year in different places, it is not possible to say definitively when his image with the other three is paraded—e.g., at the Kapālīśvara Temple in Mylapore that procession occurs on the eighth day of the Brahmotsava in the month of *Phālguna* (February-March), in the temple at Vṛddhācalam on the sixth day of the celebration during *Māgha*-month (January-February), and in the temple at Tiruvaṇṇāmalai on the fourth day of the annual cycle during the month of *Kārttika* (October-November). Once a year, however, the saint is honored in his own right. That is on the day marking the "*Makhā*"-asterism during the month of *Jyeṣṭha* (May-June). That occasion is in commemoration of his "absorption" into the Lord Naṭarāja at Chidambaram. In this, the icon of Māṇikkavācakar is accompanied by the image of his beloved Naṭarāja (or, if one is not available, with a processional image of Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti). But, despite his august company, the focus is on the ardent *bhakta* who achieved glory.<sup>22</sup> There are in the South but two temples known to be dedicated to this sweet-sounding saint, one of them is in a small village in Ramnad District in the south-east corner of the state of Tamil Nadu known as Uttarakosamaṅgai, the other in the town of Tiruvaṇṇāmalai, south-west of Madras City.

Images of Māṇikkavācakar are found in only a few homes of the more orthodox south Indian Śaivas. But this saint's poetry is widely known. Many devout Śaivas make a practice of going in groups to

the local Śiva temple during the early morning hours of the winter-month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December). There they will chant together recitations of the saint's writings as part of a larger program of fasting and prayer dedicated to the Lord Śiva. As well, Māṇikkavācakar's writings are part of the curriculum in Tamil studies at even the introductory levels.

## 8

### Śaṅkara

Few historical figures of India's past evoke the image of a scholar-saint as does the person of Śaṅkara. Not only did he leave behind him a legacy of brilliant philosophical writings but his life has also provided to later generations the picture of a man who perfected himself as a *śaṁnyāsin*. At a time when Hinduism had yet to assert its claims in the face of its detractors, he emerged as a spokesman for its eloquent defence against the rival schools of Buddhism, Jainism and the Mīmāṃsā. In terms of philosophical discourse which could be universally understood among scholars, he conceived a system so sound structurally that it silenced his detractors. As a *śaṁnyāsin*, that is, as one who has renounced the world, his dedication to the life of the mind and to the cultivation of the spirit was paradigmatic. For, he responded to his calling in a remarkably humane way. In his holy vocation, he never lost touch with the needs of the ordinary seeker. Although he is best remembered in the West for his speculative tracts, in India his name is associated with the many practices he institutionalized for the spiritual advancement of his fellow Hindus.

He was born to a Nambūdiri Brahmin family in a small village called Kālāḍi in what is now the state of Kerala. The year, as closely as modern scholarship can place it, was 788 C.E. According to custom along the Malabar Coast, his mother and father, Āryāmbā and Śivaguru,



**Fig.8. Śaṅkara**

named their only child Śaṅkara after the constellation under which he was born. Later tradition was to emphasize rather that he was known by this epithet of Śiva because he was none other than Śiva Himself incarnate. His father, Śivaguru, died while Śaṅkara was still an infant.<sup>23</sup> His mother, to whom the saint was deeply attached throughout the many years she was to survive her husband, managed somehow to encourage and develop the propensities toward learning manifested early on by her notably gifted child. It became clear in due time that he was nothing less than a child prodigy. He received the traditional sacramental thread, the *upavīta*-cord, at the age of five. In the three years which were to follow, although he did not enjoy the luxury of regular schooling, he managed to absorb much of the lore traditionally taught by the local masters.

When he was eight the precocious lad felt the need for some kind of formal discipline in his learning. He sought out, and found, a *guru*. Although his mother protested, the young Śaṅkara committed himself to the care of that *guru*, an ascetic by the name of Govindabhagavatpāda, and under his tutelage took the vows of a *śaṁnyāsin*. For the next eight years, his *guru* gave him a most rigorous program of studies, including mastery of the system expounded by his own *guru*, Gauḍapāda. By the time he was 16, Śaṅkara had already produced three of the fundamental commentaries basic to the system which he espoused under his *guru*, the so-called Advaita Vedānta school—namely, his glosses on the *Brahma-sūtra*, on the 10 principal *Upaniṣads*, and on the *Bhagavad-Gītā*—and also another, on the *Viṣṇusahasranāma stotra*, forming part of the *Mahābhārata*. Also assignable to this period of early productivity is his justly famous *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, and exposition of the monistic [*advaita*] viewpoint he championed thereafter throughout his days. It was also during these early years he composed some of his well-known psalms [*stotras*], even now memorized by high school and college students in India.

Although there is evidence that Śaṅkara had already travelled as far north as Banaras, and had already attracted to himself two or more disciples, it was sometime soon after his sixteenth year that he began

to travel widely. His aim was evidently to establish in various parts of India centers devoted to the promulgation of his adaptation of Gauḍapāda's teachings. He is known to have commissioned disciples to remain at four places. One was charged to carry on the tradition at Jyotirmāth in the North. Another was ordered to head a community at the town of Śringeri (Śrngagiri) in the South. A third was left at the town of Pūri in the East. And a fourth disciple was enjoined to stay at Dvārakā in the West to start a center there. Śaṅkara's purpose seems to have been to bring within reach of Hindus everywhere the benefits of his interpretation of life until then known only in abstract arguments. His disciples and their successors at these centers endeavoured to apply to ordinary life-situations the teachings of their master, Śaṅkara. It is for this reason, that he carried far and wide his teachings, that Śaṅkara is also often referred to by the epithet which means "world teacher," *Jagadguru*. It is also because his disciples and their successors at those centers took as their titles his name—in the form of "Śaṅkarācārya" ("Śaṅkara, the Preceptor")—that, in order to distinguish him from his several followers, he is also referred to as "Ādi Śaṅkara" ("the Original Śaṅkara").

At some point in his travels he was summoned back to his natal village. His mother lay sick. He hastened to her side. She died in his arms. The elders among his remaining relatives—still stung by his precipitous decision to leave home and to take up the life of a *saṁnyāsin* before ever having married and reared a family to carry on the line—refused him any help in performing his mother's last rites. Accordingly, even though it was contrary to his status and vow as a *saṁnyāsin*, he saw to his mother's cremation himself, unassisted.

Śaṅkara himself lived to be only 32 years old. The tradition is not clear about his death. Hagiographic accounts offer tantalizing clues that he may have suffered from some chronic weakness (e.g., "...Agastya and Nārada, pleased by what he had done, ...blessed Śaṅkara with the extension of his life-span by eight more years..."). There is not even

unanimity in regard to where he spent his last days. According to one view he expired at Kedārnāth, where he entered a small shrine containing a Śiva-*linga* and simply vanished ("...he merged into the divine..." as the hagiological accounts put it). According to a view very widely held in the South, his last days were spent at Kāñcīpuram. There, just before he expired, according to this view, he established a fifth center for the promulgation of his teachings. Whatever be the truth, there is no burial site honored among his followers as Śaṅkara's final resting place.

Images of Śaṅkara are given a place of honor in many Śaiva temples throughout south India (to say nothing of the North). Sometimes, as at Tiruvotriyūr, near Madras, he is placed in the same vestibule with the 63 *Nāyanmār*-figures. Occasionally, as at the Ekāmreśvara Temple in Madras City, he will be found in a separate shrine. Each day, as part of the regular temple routines, his image will be honored, however briefly, once the main deity has been attended to. Once a year his birthday is celebrated. The birth is commemorated on the fifth day [*pañcamī*] of the waxing half of the lunar month known as *Vaiśākha* (April-May). As part of the celebrations, the icon is bathed and draped in a clean, new cloth. Thereupon the likeness of Śaṅkara will be taken in procession around the temple precincts. At most Śaiva temples, all this proceeds on a modest scale. But in the four (or five, including Kāñcīpuram) centers which the saint established, this day is celebrated with great *éclat*. In urban communities like Madras the period immediately preceding Śaṅkara's birthday is marked by a number of events convened in his honor. Newspapers will carry announcements of discourses. Most of those will focus upon the Advaita Vedānta teachings which he promulgated. Week-long seminars will be held at prominent places such as Madras University and the Ramakrishna Mission in Mylapore, as well as at such private institutions as the Śaṅkaravihār.

Śaṅkara's presence in homes is usually in the form of an imaginative drawing. In it he is depicted with his four leading disciples.<sup>24</sup> There seems to be no cult of his figure as such. Much more notable in



present-day piety in south India is the attachment demonstrated among many sophisticated Śaivas and Smārtas to Śaṅkara's current apostolic successors at the Śṛṅgeri and the Kāñcīpuram centers. A photo of the Śṛṅgeri "Śaṅkarācārya" will be found in countless homes throughout the state of Karnataka and beyond. In the states of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, many homes will display photographs of the late, aged pontiff who for over 60 years presided at the center at Kāñcīpuram, until the late 60s, of his successor, and of an even younger person picked to succeed the present incumbent. All these figures occupy a place in south India's religious consciousness unmatched by few other living figures. They represent, as did Śaṅkara himself in his own time, living examples of dedication to the life of the mind and to the cultivation of the spirit which stand as paradigmatic to modern-day Hindus.

Our line drawing (Fig. 8) shows Ādi Śaṅkara as he most often appears in drawings of him. He is seated on a tigerskin. This is reminiscent, first of all, of Śiva-mahāyogin [q.v.], and carries with it the same symbolic references to spiritual mastery. At another level the tigerskin alludes to the *pīṭha*-seats which Śaṅkara established at the four (or five) centers already mentioned; his present-day successors are often photographed seated on a tigerskin [*vyāghracarma*] as their "throne." He is seated in a yogic posture, wearing the *kāśāya*-robes of a *saṁnyāsin*. In keeping with Śaiva ascetic tradition, he wears no *upavīta*-cord. His body bears the *tiryakpundra* marks symbolic of his purification by the sacred *vibhūti*-ash. This once again recalls the figure of Śiva-mahāyogin who was the first to "bathe" in the ashes of Kāmadeva whom Śiva curbed so that he might persevere in his meditation.

His right hand is held in what may be construed as either the "*upadeśa*"-*mudrā* of initiation into the life of the spirit; or, the "*jñāna*"-*mudrā* [var., "*cin*"-*mudrā*] of supreme wisdom which he embodies; or the "*vyākhyāna*"-*mudrā* of exposition and instruction into the intricacies of his philosophical system. His left hand extends a *pustaka*-manuscript and symbolizes his role as teacher and author.<sup>25</sup> The *daṇḍa*-staff encircled



by his right arm reiterates his role as a renunciate. It also serves as a sign of his pontifical position, as all his successors receive the *daṇḍa* as an ensign of their apostolic office. Just as the staff held by Rāmānuja [q.v.] is invariably shown to be a triple-stick [*tridaṇḍa*], symbolic of his particular philosophical stance, so the staff held by Śaṅkara—and his apostolic successors—is invariably shown to be a single stick [*ekadaṇḍa*], symbolic of Śaṅkara's Advaitic teaching that "Truth is One." At his feet is the *kamaṇḍalu*-water jug, yet another visual statement reiterating his ascetic vocation.<sup>26</sup>

At his neck are found *rudrākṣa*-beads. These may be used in meditation and prayer as a kind of "rosary." The other necklace containing crystal facets [*sphaṭika*] symbolizes purity in thought/word/deed. His head is shaved, as is appropriate to his role as a *saṁnyāsin*, and falling from his head, flowing down over his back, is the upper-cloth of his *kāṣāya*-robe. His face is shown vaguely smiling, with a far-away look, suggestive on the one hand of the sublime vision he strives to share with others and, on the other hand, of the benign concern he has for the human condition, which concern led him on his peregrinations throughout the land where his centers still flourish.

Names such as Śaṅkara, Śaṅkaramūrti, Śaṅkara Nāyar and Śaṅkara Rao are, of course, encountered in the South. It should be pointed out, however, that people bearing these need not be the namesakes of the saint. More likely, they are named after the god of good deeds [*Śaṅkara*], Śiva Himself.

## 9

### Rāmalinga

During the mid-nineteenth century there arose a saintly figure in south India who, although he never achieved the pan-Indian prominence of some of his better-known contemporaries elsewhere in India, certainly



**Fig.9. Rāmalinga**

shared with them a common vision. That vision is one which might be labelled "humanistic mysticism," and involves a blend of at least three elements—the self-conscious affirmation of a Hinduism that is at once purified and "reformed" as well as universal in its message to all mankind; the cultivation of a personal life of blamelessness and exemplary devotion; and the commitment to service of others, especially those less fortunate than oneself. The figure to whom we call attention is Rāmalinga (1823-1874). He was surely a man of his times, and most certainly the life he led and the teachings he promulgated bear striking resemblances to what remains as the heritage of such of his contemporaries as Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Śrī Rāmakrishna Paramahansa.

In our line drawing (Fig. 9) we see him standing chastely in his unadorned, all-white garment—about which more later. Suffice here to say, its lustre and purity symbolize the effulgence he personifies in his saintly presence, as well as the ultimate source of illumination from which he derives his light. His forehead shows the streaks of *vibhūti*-ash, symbolic of devotion to Śiva. His rounded face betokens a sturdiness of body and spirit, while yet traces may be seen there of a wistfulness and compassion he perpetually felt for the destitute, the diseased, and the downtrodden among his fellow creatures. His hands are clasped in a gesture highly reminiscent of several ideals intimately associated with his teachings. At one level the resolute grasp suggests the traditional Hindu *saṁkalpa-mudrā* used to affirm a commitment to do, and the requisite consecration for, a specific deed—in his case, his resolve to remain constant to the teachings he so cherished and propagated. At another level the juncture indicates the conjoining of two related but separate entities as one, and may be construed to refer to his doctrinaire Advaitic belief that the inner spirit [*ātman*] and the universal spirit [*brahman*] are ultimately one. At another level, the grasp may portray the dedication to rescue work and social service he so effectively espoused in his preachings, so that we may see demonstrated here that the stronger

(right hand) uplifts and sustains the weaker (left hand). In other renditions of the saint he may be shown seated in *padmāsana*-posture, with perhaps a volume labelled *Tiruvārūtpā* placed before him, in reference to the impressive output of his scholarly and spiritual writings. But, here, he is shown standing, his two feet firmly planted on the earth, appropriate locus of social service and spiritual *sādhana*.

The traditional biography of Rāmaliṅga, not unexpectedly, conforms to the conventional model for an Indian saint. He was born on October 5, 1823, in a small village called Marudhur, not far from the temple town of Chidambaram in what is now the state of Tamil Nadu. His parents, Ramayya Pillai and Chinnammai, were—as are most parents in hagiographic accounts—“poor but pious.” They were members of a community of considerable, though even then contested, status (the Pillais of Tamil Nadu). His father died when Rāmaliṅga was still an infant, whereupon the remnants of the family moved to the larger city of Madras, where Rāmaliṅga’s education was, at best, irregular. He was not like other children, we are told in the fashion typical of accounts of saints’ lives, and he seemed to spend much time in isolation. Neither the games nor the sweets favored by his young friends enticed him to more ordinary pastimes. Early on, perhaps at first in child’s play, he appeared to want to worship God. At the age of nine he had his first “vision,” this of the Lord Murugaṅ [q.v.] as he appears at Tiruttani; the experience came about as young Rāmaliṅga was gazing in a mirror where he “saw” the Lord’s form take shape. This event provided inspiration for the devotional poems he began writing from that time onward. The event also prompted him to declare Murugaṅ his *guru*, and the next several years of the young boy’s life were spent touring temple towns important in Śaiva piety. He was not to marry until his twenty-seventh year, but as in the hagiographic accounts of other saints too, Rāmaliṅga found no great happiness there. It is reported that on his wedding night he lectured to his youthful bride on the intricacies of *bhakti* and read to her the *Tiruvācakam* of Mānikkavācakar [q.v.]. She was never to

become an important influence in his life, as she is known to have passed away within a few months of their marriage.

The ardor and accentuation of his faith is well-articulated in some of his own many poems. Frequently he resorted to the vocabulary of "bridal mysticism" in his composition in order to express both his longing for consummation with the Divine and his sense of separation from the source of his being:

*The Lord took me for his bride while I was  
too young to know him;*

*But he does not come back for me now  
that I have matured... and am ready to accept him.*

*He garlanded me when I did not know myself;*

*Today I am ready for him, but he does not come and embrace me.*

Another example:

*Once more the day has dawned, my Lord!*

*Quite unable to bear this separation*

*I am calling continuously unto Thee. My eyes brimful of tears.*

*I get no response from Thee.*

*Can you not hear me, My Lord? I know no refuge other than Thee!*

Theologically he was not to distinguish his first love, Murukan, from the figure of the Dancing Lord, Naṭarāja [q.v.], later on so dear to him especially in the form of the Divine Dancer disclosed at the temple in Chidambaram. He simply saw no difference between the two. His invocations to this Śiva sound deep resonances with the hymns of the Tamil Śaivite saints who had flourished nearly a millenium before his time:

*O thou foremost in my mind, O Lord of Divine Dance!  
be gracious to me now:*

*Open the door; show the glowing light of grace;  
give me divine nectar to drink;*

*Enter into my body, mind, soul, intellect, and be there  
for evermore dancing the Dance of Grace in me.*

That the simplistic hagiographic accounts are wanting at certain points becomes clear when we approach the philosophical writings of Rāmaliṅga. For, they are scarcely the works of an unschooled, untrained mind! His grasp of theological issues was, in fact, very erudite. It is evident that not only could he read archaic Tamil but he could also understand the intricate arguments and technical terminology of the Śuddha Advaita Vedānta and Śaiva Siddhānta schools of thought. His work still stands as a subtle and sophisticated reconciliation of those two redoubtable systems. He gained considerable fame in his own life-time as an orator and as an author of tracts and disquisitions outlining the cardinal points of his teaching, which he referred to as the *Śuddhasanmārga*, or “The Pure and Virtuous Path,” construing truth [*sat*] to be “virtue.”

One crucial point in Rāmaliṅga’s system, then, was that spiritual fulfilment for an aspirant of enlightenment is, according to his apprehension of it, dependent upon the material welfare of other beings in the world of creation. He did not, as is the case with so many Advaitins, discount the world as *māyā* (“illusion,” “unreal”). Far from it. He valued the world as a place wherein man has been given opportunity to serve his less fortunate brethren. The radiant fulness of the Divine Being at the center of all existence is conceived by Rāmaliṅga, graphically, as enclosed within an equilateral triangle. The three angles conjoin to set apart the sacred presence and to complement one another exactly in terms of human strivings to embrace the One. The *sādhaka* who wishes success in his spiritual endeavors must, according to Rāmaliṅga, combine introspection, devotion, and service. That is, in order to achieve immortality, according to Rāmaliṅga’s philosophical theology, one must cultivate knowledge of the *ātman-brahman* supreme identity, one must at the same time shower adoration upon God in his manifest form(s), and one must help others less fortunate to ameliorate their present condition—a path [*mārga*] synthesizing into one, concentrated effort, the *jñāna/bhakti/*

*karma* emphases of traditional Hinduism. The epithet accorded Rāmalinga as “*Vaḷḷalār*” (Tamil: “One who gives in plenty”) points no doubt to the munificence of his vision—a chaste theology, a devotional commitment, and a humanitarian concern which are together the emphatic features of the heritage he has bequeathed to south India.

By the end of his career he had seen his teachings affirmed far and wide by followers. Sometime during the early part of the second half of the century, he founded a society called “*Samarasa Veda Sanmārga Saṅgha*,” to preach the primacy of the Vedas. In a sense not unlike that which gripped his contemporary, Dayananda, he felt the ancient truths of the Vedas reveal a universal religion relevant to the present age. In 1867 he made his headquarters at a village called Vadalur, where he established yet another society called “*Satyadharma Sālai*,” a volunteer force devoted to social service, at the headquarters of which even today large groups of indigents are regularly fed. In 1870, seeking respite from the throngs attracted to his movement’s activities at Vadalur, he retreated to another village called Chittivalakan where, the following year, he designed and supervised construction of a hall where devotees of various persuasions might converge to worship together. He called this the “*Satyajñāna Sabhā*,” the Hall of Wisdom. It housed no image, but its form replicated in architectural shape and decorative detail the inner being wherein is experienced at the very center, a vision of light.

The story does not end there. An extraordinary occurrence was yet to take place. And it is that even which is now remembered and celebrated by the followers of Rāmalinga with the utmost awe and reverence. Indeed, it is what is first recalled to mind when they see a depiction of him sheathed in his radiant robes.<sup>27</sup> Although, in retrospect, it was something he had alluded to covertly in some of his hymns and poems, nevertheless when it happened it caught his devotees by surprise. It is described by his followers in their own words thus: “He merged into golden light.” However else others may explain the phenomenon, his followers are firm in their faith that on January 30, 1874, their lustrous leader

returned to the Source of Light in an effulgent transfiguration. Their accounts aver that on that day early into the period of the Hindu year known as "*Uttarāyaṇa*," when it is most auspicious to pass along the bright path through death to the realm of radiant, eternal life, Rāmaliṅga retired to his room at the ashram. He had been in an elevated mood; it was a period in his life when he must have felt particularly gratified by the positive impact of his teachings on those who surrounded him. Before closing the door behind him, he prophesied to some of his closest disciples exactly what they would soon find out for themselves, whereupon he shut the door and locked it. He was never seen again. Some days later, when the room was unsealed, he had, simply, vanished. Many stories were to circulate about his disappearance, but the one which has persevered is that which declares his body became one with Light and Wisdom, all its physical traces having been dissipated into a Divine Splendor.

Today, more than one hundred years after the event, Rāmaliṅga is still regarded as one who demonstrated the ancient Hindu feat of *svacchandamarāṇa*, voluntary dying. The most famous example of voluntary dying in the Hindu tradition is, of course, the legendary hero of the *Mahābhārata*, Bhīṣma. It is not at all unlikely that his example may have been in Rāmaliṅga's mind on that day in January, for Bhīṣma, too, postponed his dying until the beginning of the auspicious "*Uttarāyaṇa*" time of the year. That the thirtieth of January in 1874 happened also to coincide with "*Bhīṣmatrayodaśī*," only adds poignancy to the association of the two figures. For, that day was the last of an annual three-day memorial to Bhīṣma. It is believed that anyone who dies on any one of those three days attains the destiny of Bhīṣma.

It is enough to say that Rāmaliṅga's latterday followers are deprived of the privilege to honor the body of their departed Master—as do the followers of so many other saints in the Hindu, and other, traditions when the holy teacher has "passed away." Instead, they honor his teachings. As followers of the "*Śuddhasanmārga*," "the Pure and Virtuous



Path," they characterize their energetic efforts as "salvation through service." Accordingly, in various ways, working at one or another of the numerous Rāmalinga centers in the South, they will still be found rendering humanitarian help to the hungry, the halt, and the homeless.

## NOTES TO SECTION TWO

1. A sect of Śaivas, more prevalent than elsewhere in the state of Karnataka. In it, both men and women carry round their neck a tiny, encased *linga*. Not only is it recognized as an erect phallus but, as with other Śaivas as well, it conveys the full presence of Śiva Himself, none other than He who is believed to move with them wherever they go.
2. In the South, in contradistinction to practice in the North, worshippers in Śiva temples are forbidden to touch the *linga*. One of the few exceptions to this rule, however, is here at Tiruvāṇkaikāval (near Trichy), where worship requires immersing the right hand in water in order to touch the *linga* under the surface.
3. Manu and other *smṛti* writers structured the orthoprax Hindu's life into four successive stages: student [*brahmācārin*], householder [*gṛhastha*], retired person [*vānaprasthin*], and recluse [*saṁnyāsin*]. It is only after one has acquired the full tradition through learning and acculturation, then married and discharged a debt to society by siring a son, that one may seek after spiritual illumination in later years, and then by degrees. It is a noteworthy detail in Hindu hagiography that most saints were married first and only thereafter sought spiritual fulfillment.
4. For example, Dakṣiṇāmūrti is often found either facing the south or on a wall to the south of the main image of a Śiva temple. But that ascetic aspect of Śiva is not at all to be identified with the *Śiva-mahāyogin* we point to in this essay.
5. These beads are supposedly the seeds of the *Elaeocarpus Ganitrus* tree. Legend also associates their origin with Śiva's tears of frenzy at the news of his wife Sati's death. In any case, *rudrākṣa*-beads are staple paraphernalia for meditating Śaivites. Vaiṣṇavas use lotus-seeds or *tulasī*-beads (*vide* essay in this volume on "*tulasī*"-plant).
6. When the cosmic ocean was churned and brought forth poison, Śiva quaffed the poison and saved the world from destruction. The only toxic trace is that he ever thereafter sported a cauterized throat, hence the name "the Blue-necked One."
7. The so-called "Proto-Śiva seal" of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization is often appealed to in order to demonstrate the continuities of this seated master of the jungle by virtue of the most ancient figure of a similar form coming from the fourth or third millenium B.C.E.
8. Thus, it may also "stand for" a sectarian rebuttal of the so-called Hindu Trinity to which early advocates of a homogeneous Hinduism assigned Brahmā the role of Creator, Viṣṇu the role of Preserver, and Śiva the role of Destroyer.
9. Reference here is made to the ancient text, the *Yoga Sūtra*, attributed to Patañjali (third century B.C.E.-fourth century C.E.).

10. *Śaivāgama* texts (ritual texts of the worshippers of Śiva) enumerate "108," of which only some are in fact found executed in stone and metal. Perhaps, next to the Chidambaram Naṭarāja image, the best known dancing form of Śiva would be as "Gajāsurasamhāramūrti," the form in which he slays the elephant, dances on its head.
11. Some prefer to see this detail as a scorpion.
12. Other Śaiva temples with images of Naṭarāja also celebrate 10-day festivals, though the incidence of those "*brahmotsavas*" differs according to local customs.
13. Two collections of hymns in Tamil are drawn upon for this purpose, the *Tevāram*, an anthology of materials composed by several medieval Śaiva saints, and the *Tiruvācakam*, a collection of hymns attributed to Māṇikkavācakar [q.v.].
14. It may be noted in passing that the animal presence also recalls the figure of Nandī, Śiva's ever-present bull-*vāhana*, itself a potent symbol for virility, and one of the most accessible animals which could have been chosen iconographically to represent brute strength and sexual vigor. Nandī is always placed head-on before a temple-image of Śiva. No one enters a Śiva temple without approaching first the place where Nandī holds sway. It may even be suggested that we are seeing the Śiva-group here before us in the line-drawing through the eyes of Nandī.
15. Two legends are pertinent at this point to illustrate. One tells how the two sons were set in contest to show who could circle the earth and return to their parents first. Kumāra dutifully mounted his peacock and set off in flight around the world. But he lost to Gaṇapati's cunning; for, his elephant-headed elder brother simply circumambulated his parents, and by his wit won the day. The other tells how the child prodigy communicated to Śiva the arcane *mantra* which even the great god did not know "Om...", for which reason Kumāra is remembered as the preceptor of his own sire, and is known accordingly by such familiar names as "Kumārasvāmī," "Bālagurunātha," etc., both of which indicate his role as his father's teacher.
16. Another, somewhat different metaphor attaches also to the temple as Śiva's abode, namely, as it represents an earthly and localized manifestation of Mount Kailāsa. It is not practical in our limited scope here to pursue the implications of that metaphor in terms of interpretation of Śiva-ite temple architecture and/or of the intentionality of worship conducted in temple-sites so perceived.
17. As Śiva's wife she is often called simply by the feminine form of his several names, e.g., Śivā, Īśvarī, Maheśvarī, etc.
18. This was then the identity assumed by the late saintly female figure of south India, Jīḷellamūḍi Ammā, when she appeared to bless her devotees at certain formal functions during the late 1970s.
19. In her well-known aspects as Kāmākṣī and as Mīnākṣī, Viṣṇu substituted for her absent father by "giving her" as bride to Śiva.
20. The other three of the "Four" saints are: Appar-Apparasvāmī-Tiruṇāvukkaracar, who represents the "*dāsa-mārga*"; Campantar-Tirujñānacampantar, who represents the "*putra-mārga*"; Cuntarar-Cuntaramūrti, who represents the "*saha-mārga*."

21. Missing of course, is the pedestal with projections for carrying the image in processions. Also, a temple-image usually is wrapped with additional pieces of cloth, and will be heavily garlanded with fresh flowers.
22. This celebration of the saint is done with great *éclat* at the Kudiraisvāmi Temple in the small village in Tamil Nadu called Tirupperundurai. Instead of a one-day festival it is there a 10-day cycle; and instead of doing it once a year as elsewhere, there it is done twice a year—once in *Jyeṣṭhā*-month (May-June), and again in *Mārgaśīrṣa*-month (November-December). This place is where, according to legend, the saint, while serving the Pāṇḍyan king on an expedition to buy some Arabian horses, was met by Śiva on horseback. It is in this form—Śiva on horseback—that the Lord is seen at his temple, one of the only temples in south India, incidentally, frequented also by “Muslims” of the neighborhood.
23. Some traditions place the death of Śaṅkara's father when his son was about eight years old.
24. These four disciples may be identified with Padmapāda (Sanandana), who was the first to join him in Banaras; Toṭaka (Kalānātha), another follower who joined him during his early Banaras period; Hastāmālaka, a young mute boy whom Śaṅkara miraculously enabled to speak; and Sureśvara (Maṇḍanamīśra), whom he converted from the Pūrvamīmāṃsā-position.
25. Because of the power of his image as philosopher-saint, Śaṅkara's role as an author and poet is often overlooked. Those who have read his compositions in the original Sanskrit are moved to compare him to some of the greatest writers in Indian literary history. For simplicity of style, clarity of expression, charm of diction, choice of imagery, and mastery of measured cadences, he has no peer among other religious writers and philosophical authors.
26. The waterjug, in addition to its value as a symbol of the wandering ascetic, has also the function of reminding devotees of Śaṅkara of one of the miracles attributed to him. In that legend, the saint is said to have placed the *kamarḍalu*-water jug on the ground to make a flowing river of water to recede; thus the pot became a ‘container’ beyond its mere mundane function. And, in a subtler sense, that meaning coincides with the arcane valence of the *saṁnyāsin*'s powers to ‘contain’ the floods of infinite being as well as the chthonic powers associated with the deep.
27. Bronze and stone images of the saint are occasionally found in Śiva temples in the South; if present, his likeness will be found in a separate shrine along the outer perimeter of the main sanctuary's precincts. A suffix often attached to his name, *Jyoti*, alludes to the “Light” he personifies as “the Effulgent” or “the Radiant One.”

### **SECTION THREE**

## **Viṣṇu and Associated Figures**

## Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa

Rāma, one of the most popular deities worshipped throughout the length and breadth of India, is generally regarded as an *avatāra* (“descent,” or incarnation) of the celestial Viṣṇu. And, it was in that god’s worldly manifestation that he presented the perfect model for man. Accordingly, Rāma is invariably shown with only two arms. That is to emphasize his most cherished identity as a human. As such, he is regularly depicted in one of several iconographic settings—at his marriage, standing with Sītā by his side [*kalyāṇa-rāma*]; or, poised in full battle array, often with his bow-string taut [*raṇa-rāma*]; or, seated with Sītā enthroned at his side for their coronation [*paṭṭābhi-rāma*]; or, as here (Fig. 10), standing with his bow in hand [*kodaṇḍa-rāma*] and flanked by his royal companions, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa, both of whom followed him in exile.<sup>1</sup> In all of these it is quite clear that Rāma is the chief figure to consider—Lakṣmaṇa on his right,<sup>2</sup> and Sītā on his left, are subordinate figures although both in their own rights have significance. Lakṣmaṇa, in our line drawing on the Lord’s favored right side, is the very embodiment of service and support—tradition avers that he is an earthly form of Ananta, or Ādiśeṣa, the cosmic Lord Viṣṇu’s primordial serpent couch [see essay on Raṅganātha, elsewhere in this volume]. He represents, among other things, the faithful devotee who is honored eternally for his attitude of attachment to his Master. Sītā, shown in our line-drawing on Rāma’s left, is the incarnation of Śrī, Viṣṇu’s eternal consort—an identity confirmed by the lotus held in her hand, suggesting in turn her association with Lakṣmī [q.v.]. She personifies the ideal of conjugal trust and forbearance, for it was she as faithful wife who followed her beloved into his forest exile without hesitation, with infinite grace. In the center is Rāma, the prototype for the royal hero. He stands tall, courageous and upright,



**Fig.10. Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa**

in reflection of the attitudes he maintained throughout his career as a prince who did not deviate from *dharma*. His garb is regal, and he carries the emblems of the warrior. The arrows lodged in his quiver are tokens of his concentrated *astra*-abilities to overcome evil, to vanquish all forms of vice. The bow in his left hand is his omnipresent power [*śakti*] to implement his will. It stands in the measure of his full height, potent and waiting, to be used at the critical moment to its fullest promise. It perfectly reflects on an inanimate level what Sītā, standing next to it, represents at a more vital level. Rāma's right hand descends in a popular signal of blessing, called *āśīr-hasta*—note its shape is reiterated in Sītā's hand—and the gesture gravitates toward his feet. There, in many depictions, the artist will insert the presence of Hanumān [q.v.], the paragon of the humble devotee who wishes only to be at the blessed feet of his master. But our artist has left the space intentionally blank. The viewer must enter that coveted space where Rama's blessings fall. Or, one may look to Lakṣmaṇa, already identified as embodiment of the faithful follower who, as the one standing nearest to Rāma's right hand of grace, receives the bounty in our stead.

There are other levels of interpretation which may be sounded to yield additional significance to the coincidence of these three figures. For example: according to Vaiṣṇava tradition, each and every syllable in the inventory of lexicography has a special esoteric identity—"a" is Viṣṇu, author of the universe, hence father of all; "u" is Lakṣmī, the teeming matrix out of which emanates all precious things, hence the great mother of all; and "m" is the *jīva*, or individual soul, which in relation to the cosmic couple, is offspring. By an arcane application of these elements to Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa is produced the sacred syllable for meditation, "Om" ("a + u + m"). Or, for another example: the three *guṇas* ("qualities") may be associated with their personalities—*sattva* ("perfection") is assigned to Rāma, *rajas* ("dynamism") is identified with Lakṣmaṇa, and *tamas* ("concealment") is ascribed to Sītā. Their disparity is what prompts action both within the divine and human realms.



Or, for yet another example: the first three human goals [*puruṣārtha*]*—dharma, artha, and kāma—*are themselves equated with Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, and Sītā respectively. And, the three of them, collectively realized, lead to the fourth and final goal, *mokṣa*.

Temples to Rāma are found throughout India. In the South several date back at least 1500 years as centers of piety; and the state of Andhra Pradesh today has the reputation of having the greatest concentration of temples dedicated to Rāma in the land. Among the more popular south Indian temples to Rāma and his retinue are those at Bhadrāchalam in Andhra Pradesh, at Madhurantakam, Vaḍuvūr, Kumbakonam and at Darbhāṣayanam in Tamil Nadu. In addition there are smaller temples and shrines at numerous places throughout the South identified with Rāma's journey into exile. To all these places devotees repair for worship. There, in the spring month of *Caitra* (March-April; according to Tamil solar reckoning the season is called *Parikuṇi*, in Kerala the month of *Mīnam*), when all nature unfolds to reveal the latent mysteries of existence, the birth of Rāma is commemorated. This occurs on the final midday of a ten-day festival. On that same night Rāma's image is taken in procession to display him as King of All, his coronation rites having been re-enacted within the temple that afternoon.

The influence of the Rāma cult has ramifications at all levels of cultural expression in south India—and elsewhere. Several manifestations may be mentioned. Songs of various kinds ranging from rustic, folk ballads to sublime hymns enrich the musical heritage of the South. Perhaps the best known among all the composers of south Indian music based on the Rāma-theme is Tyāgarāja (eighteenth century), whose pieces are played time and again in concert halls and open-streets to the delight of connoisseurs and laymen alike. Chantings or readings taken from one or another of the several versions of Rāma's life—Tulasīdās' *Rāmacaritamānas* in Hindi, Kamba's *Irāmāvatāra* in Tamil, Buddha Reddi's *Raṅganātharāmāyaṇa* in Telugu, Ezuthaccan's *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa* in Malayalam, and Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* in Sanskrit—are done before audiences large and small. The same literary



works are read in private as an act of piety, following a procedure known as "*pārāyaṇa*" in which sections are taken up sequentially over a certain number of days. Professional commentators give public discourses based on the Rāma-theme, explicating fine points of doctrinal importance. The classified "ads" of newspapers throughout the South daily carry notices of where such discourses will be held (normally in the evenings). Dramatic presentations based on episodes from Rāma's career are given in the streets and on stages. These include performances featuring live actors as well as puppets and silhouetted, cut-out figures. There is nothing in the South which corresponds to the impressive pageantry of the *Rāmlīlā* found in the North.<sup>3</sup> But south Indian dance forms, including the dance-dramas of the Kathākali and Yakṣagāna traditions, draw heavily on the Rāma-theme for their repertoires. And, the movie industry in the South has for years produced "mythologicals," many of which are based on Rāma and/or personalities associated with him. A TV serialization of the Rāmāyaṇa, which was broadcast in the late 1980s each Sunday morning for over a year, kept viewers rapt all over south India even though the sound-track was in Hindi.

At the domestic front, many homes are graced by pictures of Rāma and/or of his companions, ranging from the sentimental nineteenth century "oleographs" of Ravi Varma to the slick, commercial renderings of contemporary calendar art. Often seen also will be framed photographs of images from famous Rāma temples. Household shrines, in homes where Rāma is the *iṣṭadevatā* ("chosen deity"), feature icons of Rāma, Sītā, *et al.*, either in the form of metal or wood images, or as painted pictures. Even in homes where the *iṣṭadevatā* is some other divinity, depictions of Rāma and/or his entourage find a subordinate but significant place.

Weddings, especially among Vaiṣṇavas, are often performed under the benign gaze of the ideal couple, Rāma and Sītā, their figures elaborately fabricated in plaster and draped in silks, garlanded with flowers. Children of pious families are often made the namesakes of the deities so that



**Fig.11. Hanumān**

divine presences are invoked whenever children are summoned. Among popular boys' names associated with Rāma, albeit often used in contracted forms, are: Dāśarathi, Kalyāṇarāma, Paṭṭābhirāma, Rāghava, Raghupati, Raghurāma, Rāma or Śrīrāma, Rāmacandra, Rāmadāsa, Rāmasvāmī, Vijayarāghava and Vīrarāghava, *etc.* Other names for boys are Bharata and Lakṣmaṇa, commemorating Rāma's brothers of epic fame. Among girls' names which draw inspiration from Rāma-piety, the ones most often heard are: Sītā, Jānakī, Maithilī, Vaidehī, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Tārā, Ūrmilā, *etc.*

The most enduring influence which devotion to Rāma exerts in the South—or anywhere, for that matter—has to do with inspiration. We began by speaking of Rāma as the perfect model for man. We must end by pointing out that it is as a perfect model for man that he remains even today. His “nobility” is not construed as having so much to do with his royal lineage as it does with the noble qualities he exemplifies in truthfulness [*satya*] and courage [*dhairya*]. Wherever else his presence may be discerned—and we have shown that his presence has entered into and influenced many manifestations of south Indian culture—he dwells also as Inner Ruler among those who cherish him. Because he is remembered to stand rigidly and fixed in defence of the principles of *dharma*, he stands firm and straight in the hearts of his devotees. Thus he continues to inspire mere mortals to imagine their highest potentialities, and ever lives up to his name “He who gives [true] happiness,” “He who charms his devotees” [root *√ram*, “to make happy”].

## 11

### Hanumān

Appearances deceive. The truth of a matter is often not what it seems. Although the figure of Hanumān resembles an ape, that is not how he is apprehended by true believers. Those unfamiliar with things Hindu must be forewarned: while this widely-popular divinity looks like

a monkey, the fact is, he is revered as the embodiment of resourcefulness, devotion, elocutionary skills, cunning intelligence, and ascetic powers. Besides, Hindus simply do not worship monkeys! There are no important shrines to Sugrīva (Hanumān's commander-in-chief in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*) or to Aṅgada (the prince of the monkey troops) or to any others of the heroes who are celebrated in Hindu legend as Hanumān's jungle companions. But shrines are found honoring Hanumān—and those have multiplied across the length and breadth of India mainly because of his association with Rāma [q.v.]. He is worshipped despite his simian shape, not because of it.

His theriomorphic (i.e., beast-form) lineaments may, indeed, point to an independent, archaic monkey cult of some kind in ancient times, perhaps even to some kind of totemistic worship involving the ape. Slabs of powerful monkey figures are even today discovered in remote fields and forest clearings. But this kind of association of Hanumān with primitive power has in large part been submerged in the identity he now enjoys as Rāma's servant and devotee *par excellence*.

And so we see depictions of Hanumān, as in our line drawing (Fig. 11), in an attitude of meekness and hushed awe. It is this attitude which overtakes him whenever he finds himself in the presence of Rāma, his lord. Here, to express his feeling of veneration, his right hand is raised in the direction of his nose and mouth—as if to insure that his unworthy breath may not taint the unsullied purity of Him before whom he stands. The upward-pointing gesture also suggests the supremacy of the Other while, in contrast, his left hand is dropped to mark his own lower status in the creaturely order of existence. The tail, as in most delineations of Hanumān which express this attitude of humility, falls deferentially behind him. He is clad in a *dhotī*, pulled up above his knees to indicate his readiness for an active role upon demand. Over all, he wears a number of decorations—anklets, waistband, bracelets and biceps ornaments, necklaces, earrings and a crown. One of these deserves special notice, the pearl necklace at his throat. It was given

to him by Sītā immediately after Rāma's coronation as a token of her appreciation of Hanumān's extraordinary qualities of head and heart. His flowing mane symbolizes his supernatural strength, on the one hand, while the *ūrdhva-puṇḍra* mark on his forehead, on the other hand, stands in evidence that his powers are subservient to Viṣṇu (i.e., Rāma in his original form). The *upavīta*-cord which crosses his rugged torso is a trace of the brāhmanical imprint given to his essential, untamed character, which influence has indeed graced him with remarkable endowments in learning, subtlety, virtuosity, and eloquence [*adhīti / bodha / ācaraṇa / pracāra*].

A variety of other depictions of Hanumān in a standing [*sthānaka*] posture may be noted briefly. Sometimes he is shown much as in our line-drawing except that the position of his left hand is slightly elevated. Thus, it may be raised palm-upward, either toward the elbow of the hand halting his breath, in order to give it support, or extended outward, in mute request to his Lord for instructions. More often, both hands are raised and joined in *añjali-hasta*, a sign of respect; or, in an iconographically equivalent gesture, both arms may be folded with palms tucked respectively under opposite forearms. A more heroic stance is the not uncommon one which shows him standing with legs braced evenly apart [*samapādasthānaka*], his two hands ripping open his breast to reveal within his heart the presence of Rāma, or of Rāma and Sītā together. In such renditions, Hanumān's face displays an expression of exquisite joy; his tail will be erect and bristling; he may or may not be shown with a *gadā*-club propped by his side.

A very popular portrayal of Hanumān shows him with his legs in a running or jumping position [*ālīḍhapāda*], one or both arms carrying the mountain of healing herbs.<sup>4</sup> His tail will invariably be shown raised in vigorous affirmation of his heroic deed. Hanumān is also depicted kneeling with one leg bent to the ground—sometimes that will be his left knee, sometimes his right—his hands held either in the *añjali-hasta* or outstretched with palms upraised. That latter position is the one regularly

used when Hanumān's likeness is fashioned to serve as an oversized *vāhana*-carrier for the Lord's image when it is taken in festive procession around the temple. In that likeness his tail will be shown elevated, while in the other postures it will be shown touching the ground.

Seated Hanumāns are found, too. In that posture he is shown to demonstrate his expertise as a yogin, his many *siddhi*-powers—about which, more later—only suggested by the powerful contours of his body. Legs crossed, tail in repose, *gadā*-club set aside, hands folded in *dhyāna-mudrā*, eyes lowered—he presents the perfect picture of the accomplished spiritual master who has utterly subordinated his animal instincts. This view of Hanumān (which may or may not be reinforced by the presence of a *yogapaṭṭa*-band surrounding his body at the knees) affords an instructive glimpse of an influential facet of his personality.

Occasionally to be found in the South are five-headed depictions of Hanumān [*pañcamukha-hanumān*], the four additional heads representing Garuḍa, Varāha, Aśva and Simha—an impressive theriomorphic presence, indeed! In all cases of Hanumān depictions, regardless of attitude emphasized, the color assigned to his body in *dhyāna-sloka*s ("meditational stanzas") is *golden*, while his face is to be recalled as red. Contemporary color prints showing him with a red or a green body, however eye-catching they may be, are untraditional.

"The name "Hanumān" means "one with swollen cheeks," and evidently refers to his simian countenance, although a common story attributes his name to a broken jaw suffered during infancy as the unhappy consequence of a daring and wondrous act. Another popular name by which he is known, "Āñjaneya," identifies him as the son of the beautiful nymph, Āñjanā. Two other well-known names are actually patronymics, both referring to the wind-god as his father—"Māruti" and "Vāyuputra" (variants: "Pavanaputra," "Pāvani"). Yet another name by which he is known is an epithet for his willingness to attend upon Rāma as servant, "Rāmadāsa." In north India he is known as "Bajraṅg Balī" (a corruption of *Vajraṅga balī*), meaning "the strong one with an adamant body". Most of the others used—as one might expect—as names for boys in south India today.

Hanumān is, as already indicated, honored mainly in tandem with worship of Rāma [q.v.]; shrines to the monkey-devotee are found in all Rāma temples. In some of those places, however, the attention given to the exemplary devotee, Hanumān, has been so marked that, for all intents and purposes, his shrine becomes the major attraction. Thus arises the impression that there are "Hanumān temples"—and the accuracy of that impression depends upon whether or not the presence of Rāma is also acknowledged. Places where Hanumān's devotion seems to take precedence over Rāma-*bhakti*, however, can be cited, *e.g.*, at Mylapore, at Rajahmundry, at Mangalore, at Chittur, *etc.* At any center where Hanumān is worshipped, special importance will be attached to Sundays (when, in an anachronistic gesture, an ancient relationship this tawny beast had at some primitive stage with the Sun may be intimated). Each year, in *Caitra* (March-April; according to Tamil solar reckoning, the month is *Pankuṇi*, while in Kerala's calendar it is the month of *Mīnam*), his birth is commemorated, and special *pūjās* are arranged, his processional image [*utsavabera*] is taken out into the streets, and possibly also some discourses are programmed in his honor. And, of course, whenever special worship is accorded Rāma and Sītā, Hanumān is included in the liturgies.

Many Hindus seek out Hanumān, wherever he may be found, for special boons. To mention only some of these instances of piety will reveal the surprising variety of powers attributed to this resourceful supernatural. Actors and directors, from both stage and screen, go to him to pray for popular acclaim of their vehicles. Barristers with cases to argue in court petition his rhetorical resourcefulness. Professors with classes to meet crave his command of language. Students with exams to write cling to the hope of his help for high passes. Unmarried persons, male or female, anxious about a pending arranged marriage (or lack thereof), pray for a swift and happy conclusion of the contract. Relatives of persons possessed by spirits take the afflicted to Hanumān for a swift cure. Fortune-tellers, astrologers, and forecasters go to him for



blessings of their crafts. Along highways, truckdrivers halt at his roadside shrines to ask Hanumān to avert all perils from their path as they ply their routes. Sports figures—soccer stars, tennis professionals, gymnasts and cricketers—throng to his doors. Body-builders, too, experience a special magnetism to Hanumān; more often than not, however, they pray to their muscular hero at a private shrine especially constructed near where they work out. And, if there be a Hindu “patron saint” for bachelors, that title belongs to Hanumān, the archetypal celibate.

The domestic worship of Hanumān is characterized by devotion in home shrines to his image either in three-dimensional shape or in two-dimensional framed pictures of him. Some worship him in their private *pūjā*-rooms as chief, chosen deity [*iṣṭadevatā*], some as one among others [*sāmānyadevatā*], to whom it is their privilege to give daily honors. His portrait is, moreover, stamped on medallions, and these are often given to children as a talisman against evil spirits—though they may also be worn by adults for whatever blessings Hanumān may be pleased to grant. His presence is petitioned at times when crisis threatens, and countless children in the South are taught at an early age at least one invocation to Hanumān so that they may use it as needed—for examples, when terror wakes them in the dark from the clutches of a nightmare they will have a memorized litany to recite, or when they have to walk alone through a threatening area there is a formula to mutter. Adults, too, resort to invocations to Hanumān, though in more sophisticated accents. In addition to *japa* (“repetition”) of his or of Rāma’s name, it is known that Hanumān will be present whenever the *Rāmāyaṇa* (“the story of Rāma”) is read, and most surely when that portion of the story describing his exploits is featured. Hence, adults at home are often observed giving much time to the reading of the “Sundara-kāṇḍa” portion of the epic, going over it again and again in the firm conviction that by keeping company thus with Hanumān good fortune will come their way. Additionally, many men are known to undertake a special “*upāsana*” (“settling upon” in meditation)—a serial act which requires



the regular repetition of a secret *mantra* over a period of several weeks, accompanied by prescribed meditational practices and various austerities. The object for undertaking an *upāsana* varies with the man involved—an aspiring writer may do it to acquire eloquence, a struggling retail clerk may do it to become rich, an ambitious businessman may do it to gain a dominating influence over others—but all who do it in honor of Hanumān undertake that “*upāsana*” in the assurance that he alone possesses the resources to which they aspire.

Indeed, Hanumān is considered to be a veritable repository of powers [*siddhis*]. Eight are universally associated with him.<sup>5</sup> Devotees who regularly worship Hanumān hope to acquire, through single-minded devotion to Hanumān, some traces of the *siddhis* that paragon of devotion himself has in such abundance. But, to be sure, only by remote analogy. In any case, Hanumān is a being infinitely more richly graced than the *siddhis* associated with him suggest. Just as a practicing yogin who pursues the eight stages of self-cultivation as outlined by Patañjali falls short of the goal if he stops, satisfied with the manifestations of psychic power described in the seventh stage and does not pass on to the final stage of *samādhi*, so also the devotee of Hanumān falls short of the mark if he stops, satisfied with the acquisition of *siddhi*-powers and other mundane blessings associated with the heroic Hanumān and fails to persevere in probing Hanumān’s infinitely more profound and powerful mastery of *bhakti*.

This essay began by pointing out that Hanumān is more than he appears to be. Let it end by pointing out that it is in just this deceptive impression that he most resembles his votaries. For, those who approach Hanumān are more than they appear to be also. Just as the beast, Hanumān, has more mystery to his being (namely, his *bhakti*) than at first appears, so that human worshipper, despite his overweening animal proclivities, has potential (namely, his spiritual development) yet to be tapped. Like Hanumān before Rāma, the devotee who takes the humble hero as his measure will likewise stand in silent awe, on the one hand



**Fig.12. Bālakṛpā**

conscious of his creaturely nature, on the other hand drawn to the direction of his higher destiny. Thus the image projected by Hanumān, as one rapt in breathless fascination by a beatific vision of the other, has continuing relevance today for all creatures held in awe by their own intimations of a nobler self.

## 12

### **Bālakṛṣṇa**

“*Bāla*” means “child,” and it is in the form of an endearing infant that Kṛṣṇa is widely worshipped as “Bālakṛṣṇa.” He is depicted in several different ways: as a baby, dressed or naked reclining on an oversized banyan leaf, his left hand holding his right foot to the mouth; as a toddler who has mischievously crept into his mother’s pantry and is there enjoying forbidden fruits, usually butter or curds, that had been put aside frugally for later use; as a babbling boy who has entered into the restricted areas reserved for the ladies of the house, there asking impertinent questions with mystic resonances, such as “Where do babies come from?”; and as a furtive child trying to hide from his mother’s inquisitiveness the fact that he has crammed into his mouth the clay and dust of the garden, symbolizing that in him is the consummation and restoration of the entire world which is his playground.

In our line drawing (Fig. 12) he is shown creeping, having just secretly snatched up some freshly churned butter. There are many interpretations of this imagery. At the most obvious level, here is the child of a dairying community, revelling in what is most plenteous and bountiful—and what is, indeed, the most precious end-product of a dairy person’s unending toil. Another level interprets the butter (which, in traditional India, is white) as a symbol for *sattva-guṇa* (“purity”). The balm of this ointment is being spread abroad, purifying all things, as the baby Kṛṣṇa’s greasy hands leave a trail of butter wherever he crawls. At yet another level of interpretation, the butter is but the quintessence

of the Milky Ocean, source of all existence, from which springs Lakṣmī [q.v.], goddess of plenty and consort of Viṣṇu; thus he holds aloft none other than the *śakti*-power by which all the material world comes into being.

There are, in fact, not a great many temples or public shrines dedicated to Bālakṛṣṇa in the South. He is, however, the darling on the domestic front, where all varieties of his images grace *pūjā*-cupboards in homes throughout the South. It is to be noted here that his worship is not confined to Vaiṣṇavas alone but quite clearly is celebrated by all type of Hindus. For some, he is a subsidiary companion to whichever deity happens to be the family's *kula-devatā*. While according to mystical theology all devotees, regardless of sex and age, are to consider themselves as the "doting mother" of this unpredictable child, nonetheless it may be observed that women seem especially attracted to this child-god. To him they resort with fervent prayers that they may be blessed with so sweet a child as he. There is a repertoire of devotional songs and popular poems addressed to Bālakṛṣṇa which have accumulated over the centuries, witnessing to the warmth and affection generated by thoughts of him.

Once a year, when the nights tend to become longer (after the summer solstice and before the autumnal equinox or, more precisely, on the eighth day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Bhādrapada* [August-September]), the birth of the darkling one is marked with great thanksgiving. At the end of a day's fast, a family moves toward the shrine where Kṛṣṇa may be found. His presence there is often indicated, on this holiday, by drawing in a white paste-like preparation a trail of his baby-footprints leading from the threshold to the inner shrine. There, after reciting *stotras* and rehearsing stories of his birth, his votaries celebrate his nativity at midnight. Thereupon they break their fast by eating special sweets known to have been dear to the Lord as a child. While this is primarily a domestic holiday, there is at least one well-known temple in Kerala State, at Guruvāyūr, where the anniversary is celebrated on a grand scale. Indeed, most Vaiṣṇava temples mark Kṛṣṇa's birthday—

"*Kṛṣṇa Jayantī*," or "*Śrī Jayantī*" as it is called—in some way, if only by a modest celebration.

Another holiday associated with Kṛṣṇa comes later in the year closer to the time of the winter solstice. It comes late in the month of *Kārttika* (October-November). It is called "*Dīpāvalī*," and is a festival of lights [*dīpa*]. It is a time when all who wish to honor the dusky deity who restored light to the world when he killed the demon Naraka<sup>6</sup> do so by taking a cleansing and revivifying oil bath, by donning handsome new clothes, and by exchanging sweets and other small gifts. Considerable excitement is generated by lighting up fireworks which ignite the otherwise impenetrable night skies.

One further indication of the pervasive influence of devotion to Kṛṣṇa among Hindus is to be found in the names of children which recall in some way the Divine Child. Some common names for boys are Vāsudeva (another name for Kṛṣṇa), Bālakṛṣṇa, Navanītakṛṣṇa ("Butter-ball Kṛṣṇa"), and Śrīkṛṣṇa—to cite only some coming directly from Sanskritic sources and ignoring for the moment similar names in Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada. Even girls are given names like Kṛṣṇammā ("Mother of Kṛṣṇa"), Kṛṣṇā (the feminine equivalent of his name), Devakī (the name of Kṛṣṇa's legendary mother), Yaśodā (the name of Kṛṣṇa's legendary foster-mother), Bṛndā (reminiscent of the garden where Kṛṣṇa sported as a child), and Rohiṇī (the asterism under which Kṛṣṇa was born). So it is that the diminutive child looms large in the hearts and minds and collective consciousness of the South.

## 13

### **Kṛṣṇa-Veṇugopāla**

This is the form the youthful Kṛṣṇa takes as a cowherd [*go*, "cow" + *pāla*, "protector" + *veṇu*, "flute"; also sometimes called "*Gānagopāla*," *gāna*, "singing"]. As such he is often shown with a cow behind him, while he stands at ease in the *tribhanga*-pose, in addition with one



**Fig.13. Kṛṣṇa-Veṇugopāla**

leg crossed languidly in front of the other [*vyatyasta-pāda*]. In his hands—normally two—he holds his flute in readiness to play his music of mystery and enchantment which serves to attract those who are off in the distance to approach wherever he is. Invariably artists attempt to depict his innocent and boyish face as wreathed in a smile, indicating at least tenderness, perhaps also suggesting his thoughts of rapture soon to be realized by union with his helplessly entranced companions, or maybe even indicating his pleasure in the contemplation of his own virtuosity. His complexion is described as “dark” as a rain-cloud. He is dressed elegantly with a fine *dhotī*, jewels, earrings, anklets and bracelets. His head is crowned by a gleaming but modest diadem. This is complemented by a feather from the tail of peacock, a creature of which the Lord is traditionally said to be fond for its swarthy beauty which approaches his own.

On occasion images of this handsome cowherd are found without the flute, the two hands held toward the head and mouth in such a way, however, as to suggest its invisible, mystical presence. In such cases he is called simply “Gopālakṛṣṇa.” In any event, it should be noted that the flute is an important symbol, whether actually shown or not. It refers to none other than man himself who, so long as he remains empty of egoity, hollowed/hallowed to receive the Lord’s activating spirit (“breath”), will be as but an instrument upheld in the hands of the Divine One.

Sometimes images of this form of Kṛṣṇa are found with four or more arms, the upper right and left pair holding the discus and conch respectively, making explicit Kṛṣṇa’s identification with the Universal Lord Viṣṇu. Other hands may hold a lotus [*padma*], a goad [*aṅkuśa*], a sugar-cane [*ikṣu*], a lasso [*pāśa*], and like objects reiterating his sweet and captivating nature. Sometimes he is also seen flanked by his consorts, Rukmiṇī on his right and Satyabhāmā on his left [*q.v.*], each holding a lotus. More often he is seen with just one female companion, his favorite Rādhā.





**Fig.14. Kṛṣṇa-Gītācārya**

The cow may be construed to symbolize Dharma (the principle of "Righteousness"). Recall that, according to the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teaching in the fourth chapter, the Lord appears in his earthly manifestations to stabilize Dharma, and to serve as its interpreter and man's guide (*vide* essay on *Kṛṣṇa: Gītācārya*). Here, the depiction suggests the attractive figure of Veṇugopālakṛṣṇa is none other than that same Lord who stands between us and the Law, charming us to approach ever near its Source.

The center for worship of Kṛṣṇa as Gopāla is in north India, around Mathurā and Bṛndāvan, places traditionally associated with Kṛṣṇa's birth and early life. In the South, worship of Veṇugopāla and/or Gopālakṛṣṇa is fairly widely dispersed, and images of the deity in this form are found in a number of small temples and shrines. More commonly, however, this form is honored as the household deity by Vaiṣṇava as well as by Smārta *bhaktas*. In such home shrines he is afforded the same loving attention, and the same holiday cycle is celebrated in his name, as is observed in the worship of other forms of this deity like Bālakṛṣṇa [q.v.]. Nor should it be imagined that worship of Veṇugopālakṛṣṇa is limited to high caste Hindus. If anything, this bucolic figure makes a greater impact among country folk. In countless villages throughout the South, one sees suggestive traces that the Kṛṣṇa cult, with the Lord as the flute-playing hero, is a tradition that is alive and well.

## 14

### **Kṛṣṇa-Gītācārya**

It is quite possible that, of all the Hindu deities, Kṛṣṇa is the one best known beyond India, especially in the West. Perhaps his fame there is due to his prominence in the Hindu scripture known as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (popularly called, simply, "the Gītā"), a work not only dear to Hindus as the spoken word of the Lord but also widely read in translations abroad.

Of course, in India, the figure of Kṛṣṇa is revered in several diverse manifestations, witnessing to different moments in his on-going earthly career. For, he is “seen” variously as an endearing infant, as a mischievous child, as a playful adolescent, as a winsome lover, as a steadfast companion and, finally, as an understanding husband. In all these forms the devotee looks upon Kṛṣṇa as an intimation of the Divine Reality that somehow, mysteriously, pervades all life (Kṛṣṇa is, as already noted, generally viewed as an *avatāra*, or incarnation, of Viṣṇu, the “Pervader”). Consequently, the worship of Kṛṣṇa is found throughout India, making his claim in different ways upon the hearts of all classes of Hindus. One may even venture to say that he is the most popular of all Hindu deities worshipped today.<sup>7</sup>

The story of the *Gītā* derives from the great and ancient Indian epic known as the *Mahābhārata*, and tells of the critical moment at the beginning of the pitched battle between the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas. Arjuna, chief among the Pāṇḍavas, considering what devastation will be brought to pass by the impending battle, refuses to fight. Then Kṛṣṇa, who has been acting as Arjuna’s charioteer and who is, therefore, his closest comrade, counsels that under the inescapable circumstances of warfare a true warrior cannot fall by the wayside, wretchedly, and do nothing—he must fight the battle before him.

What Kṛṣṇa says in detail, and what finally convinces Arjuna to fight manfully, is the body of the teachings to be found in the *Gītā*. The picture, here, depicts what for many Hindus is the moment of decision for Arjuna, when Kṛṣṇa, his friend and God, instructs him, “Arise! Transcend your impotency. Your groveling weakness and faint-hearted despondency ill-becomes a hero!” (*Bh.G.* II: 3). In our line-drawing (Fig. 14), as in most renderings of the “*Gītācārya*” episode of the *Gītā* (lit., “the “instructor of the *Gītā*,” i.e., Kṛṣṇa), Kṛṣṇa is the dominating figure. He is invariably shown on a higher plane than his comrade who, throughout the text, is to be imagined as immobile,

totally collapsed, barely able to rise to his destiny. Iconographically, Kṛṣṇa is sometimes shown in his divine form with many heads and multiple arms (his "*viśvarūpa*," or cosmic, form, in illustration of his transfiguration in Chapter Eleven of the *Gītā*). Here, as is more usual, he is shown with two arms only, in his human form. Kṛṣṇa (which means, literally, "black", or "blue", or "dark") is often further distinguished from Arjuna (which means, literally, "white," or "fair") by his coloration—a detail that sounds many resonances of an ancient, almost forgotten, prehistoric Indo-Aryan dialogue.

There are a few *Gītā*-temples, but these are mostly in north India; and most of them seem of recent vintage. There is at least one important south Indian temple celebrating "Pārthasārathi" ("charioteer to Arjuna," viz., Kṛṣṇa), notably the one at Triplicane, a section of Madras' inner-city; it dates back to an early period of the Christian era<sup>8</sup> and it is now, as it has been for centuries, a locus of great devotion and festive celebrations. Moreover, a number of south Indian Vaiṣṇava temples have special shrines featuring Pārthasārathi, even though the main deity might be a different form of Viṣṇu. So, the figure of Kṛṣṇa as the Instructor of Righteousness and of Righteous Behavior is not unknown in the South by any means. There is in Haryana State, north of Delhi, a city called Kurukshetra, believed to be located near the ancient site where the *Mahābhārata*-battle was fought—assuming, of course, that it was in fact an historical event. In this place in recent years a University has been founded, its motto being, quite fittingly, "Do your duty with commitment" (*yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi*).

The real measure of the living tradition associated with the *Gītā*, however, has to do not so much with visual representation as with the spirit in which it is honored as a scripture *par excellence*. As an authoritative text forming part of what is called the Prasthānatraya (the triple - text viz., the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā* and the Brahmasūtra), it appears in many different versions, the original Sanskrit having been translated many times over in all of the Indian vernaculars. In one form or another it is memorized, chanted, eulogized; commentaries are written upon it, discourses are delivered far and wide



**Fig.15. Kṛṣṇa with two wives**

to expound its doctrines, vows are made to read it serially over and again [*pārāyaṇa*]; in some houses it is employed as an object of actual worship; miniature replicas of it are carried by some as a talisman; and, in many courts of law it is used as a symbol of veracity upon which to swear to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

A visual depiction that conjures up to any Hindu who sees it all—or even some—of these many associations is then, Pārthasārathi, the charioteer of the Great Battle, the “teacher of the *Gītā*” [*Gītācārya*]. Quite clearly, even when the festival icon [*utsava-bera*] of that form of Kṛṣṇa is taken in procession along the streets surrounding his temple in Triplicane today, those who watch it pass by, taking notice once again of the familiar scars<sup>9</sup> that mark its lovely face, are deeply moved by the stirrings of wonder and awe at this Lord whose glorious countenance bears the bruises of an impassioned and outrageous battle.

## 15

### Kṛṣṇa with Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā

That Kṛṣṇa’s existence on earth was completely human is further reiterated by the fact that he is remembered also as a married man. Not only did he enjoy the thrill of romantic abandon but he knew also the contentment of marital commitment. However mystically either side of Kṛṣṇa’s amorous activities may be interpreted, one cannot but be impressed by the human touches given in the South to depictions of him in company with Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā. These two personifications of the Eternal Feminine [*śakti*] are represented as his wives. He stands with them at his ease, his arms encircling each with equal tenderness. The figure of Kṛṣṇa is here depicted as mature, if not somewhat portly, with a smile on his face. All three are dressed with the good taste that is normative of an upper, middle-class family.

But, perhaps the figures deserve a closer look. Consider the two standing on either side, almost confining the imagination by their merely mortal measure. Although they are outwardly of similar appearance, the two women must, however, be seen as representing the two polarities of not only the promise but also the problematic of the human condition. On the one hand, at Kṛṣṇa's right, observe Rukmiṇī, the very incarnation of *sattva-guṇa*, characterized by sweetness of disposition, guilelessness and innocent trust, unquestioning loyalty to her lord, a benign and composed demeanor at all times. Iconographically, she is often depicted as golden in color, holding a lotus. On the other hand, on Kṛṣṇa's left, is Satyabhāmā, the very incarnation of *rajas* and *tamo-guṇas*, short-tempered, suspicious and of a self-assertive nature, jealous while always demanding of her spouse, and subject to fits of passion. Iconographically, she is depicted as dark in complexion; she, too, is usually depicted holding a lotus.

Already, perhaps, we are alerted to see that there is, here, more than meets the eye at first glance. Look again at Kṛṣṇa, standing between these two antitheses. He is the mediator between them. As husband, he is the master of them. As provider, he sustains them. He embraces them, enthusing-enfusing them with self-assurance. Rukmiṇī, who is none other than Śrī, the personification of the Lord's transcendent, static being, is intimately associated with, but set apart from, Satyabhāmā, herself but the incarnation of Bhūdevī, personification of the dynamic and ever-active, mundane power of the Creator and Preserver. The gentle, enigmatic, amiable deity standing between the two fulsome figures represents then, one might say, the final assimilation of all the processes of involution, centering in him, being simultaneously attended by (his flanking consorts) the forces of endless evolution. Thus, while at first we may see only Kṛṣṇa standing pat at his most domesticated, the more profound vision is of the Lord of the Universe at the apogee of his cosmic form.

For obvious reasons this trio is most popularly celebrated in domestic shrines. To be sure, there are temples dedicated to Kṛṣṇa in this benign



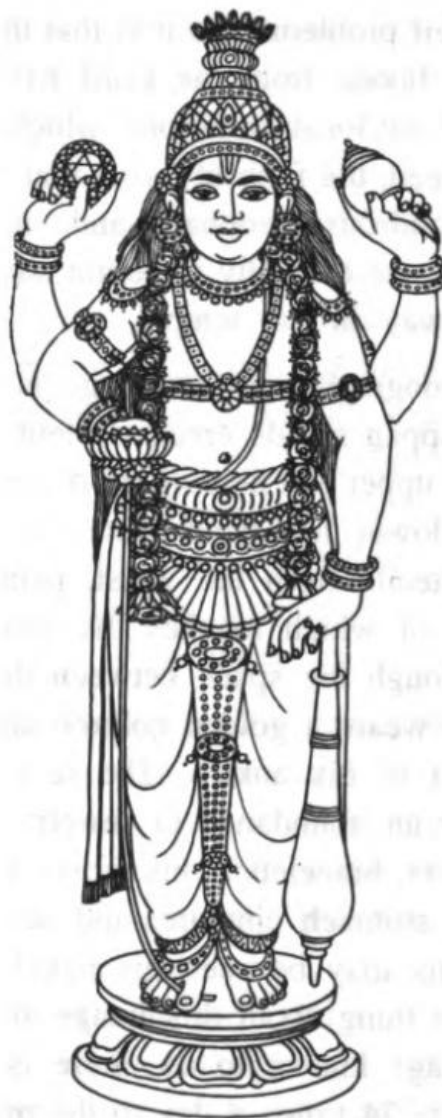
form but they are not notably many. It is the householder [*gṛhastha*] who responds most sympathetically to this autobiographic analogue of the ambiguities of his own day-to-day existence.

The usual holidays, celebrations, and special days associated with Kṛṣṇa in his other forms are observed for the Lord also in this manifestation. These have already been alluded to when we described Bālakṛṣṇa [*q.v.*]. It remains here only to point out that during *Dīpāvalī*—that most popular, pan-Indian festival celebrated in the month of *Kārttika* (October-November) to commemorate Kṛṣṇa's illustrious triumph over the powers of darkness (the demon Naraka)—it is, of all persons, Satyabhāmā who is remembered as the one who, when Kṛṣṇa was temporarily disabled, took up the gauntlet and came to his rescue, thus saving the day. However much she may be slandered in stories as the nagging wife, she is nonetheless the paragon who is recalled by many Vaiṣṇavas on that Night of Nights. It is remarkable, indeed, how popular piety does not forget to celebrate in this way the dynamics of estrangement and reconciliation which typify the stormy, conjugal partnership of Kṛṣṇa with his perversely maladroit, but perfectly resourceful, spouse.

## 16

### **Kṛṣṇa : Guruvāyūrappan**

"Guruvāyūr" is the name of a medium-sized town in the central part of Kerala State, situated on the slopes of the mountain range called the Western Ghats. It is famous for its temple, devoted to Lord Kṛṣṇa, who is known there as "Guruvāyūrappan" ("Father" of Guruvāyūr). The temple dates back to the eighth century, but it seems to have become popular only in the sixteenth century. Its fame has since continued to increase until now it is a major center for pilgrimage in south India. Here, it is believed, the Lord Viṣṇu manifests himself in the identical form in which he appeared to Vasudeva and Devakī to announce to



**Fig.16. Kṛṣṇa : Guruvāyūrappan**

them his imminent birth as their miraculous, yet mortal, child Kṛṣṇa. The manifestation is as Kṛṣṇa himself was to become as a young man—handsome, beneficent, lordly. As such, just as Viṣṇu blessed the long-suffering Devakī, so does he in this form at Guruvāyūr bless all who come to him with their problems. So it is that this temple is approached by pilgrims seeking boons from the Lord Kṛṣṇa. That he is actively present is reiterated in local traditions which aver various miracles attributed to him; indeed, the faithful swear that in living memory (1971) the Lord made a wondrous theophany and, in the form of an almost unnoticed lad, gave some critically important advice for a reconstruction program then underway in the temple.

The standard iconography of the image is as shown in our line-drawing (Fig. 16). Appaṇ stands erect, without any consorts [*ekabera*]. He has four arms, his upper pair holding the discus and conch respectively right and left. His lower left hand rests on a large *gadā*-club. His lower right hand extends from the waist, palm upward, and holds a lotus the long stem of which reaches the length of the trunk of his body and passes through the space between the first and second toes of his right foot. He wears a golden colored *dhotī* which reaches from just below his waist to his ankles. The rest of his body would be bare were it not for an abundance of jewelry and decorations. There are rings on his fingers, bracelets at his wrists, bands around his biceps, jewelled epaulets, a stomach cincture, and several tiers of necklaces. Underneath all of this may be seen his navel, and an *upavīta*-thread. The most remarkable thing about this image and its decoration is that, unlike any other image known to us, there is a complete change of clothes and ornaments 24 times a day to the main icon in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple. With each change, starting early in the morning, the faithful devotee may discern the suggestion of progressively different phases of the Lord's "life" from infancy to full maturity being displayed.

While in most Śaiva temples, for example, worship routines are guided by liturgical manuals called "Śaiva Āgamas," and similarly in Vaiṣṇava

temples of the South rites are normally fixed by the canons of either the “Pāñcarātra Āgamas” or the “Vaikhānasa Āgamas,” in this temple—as is often found at temples in and around Kerala—worship is conducted by a particular community of Brahmins known as “Nambūdiris,” whose tantric temple rites feature certain routines not met with elsewhere in the South.<sup>10</sup> But what is more noteworthy about the worship at Guruvāyūr is that the temple of Appaṇ (Kṛṣṇa) there—perhaps as a consequence of its having become such a popular pilgrimage center, perhaps as its cause—is renowned as a place for the faithful to come for the punctilious performance of various *saṁskāra*-sacraments, i.e., “rites of passage” which mark the on-going life of an orthoprax Hindu. Infants are brought here for the first feeding of solid food [*annaprāśana-saṁskāra*]; young boys are invested with the sacred thread [*upanayana-saṁskāra*] in a special pavilion close to the Lord’s sanctuary; and the many young folks whose marriages are performed here consider themselves fortunate to have their wedding [*vivāha-saṁskāra*] blessed by the presence of the *avatāra* who is famous as the upholder of Dharma in all mundane activities (*vide* essay on Kṛṣṇa as “Gītācārya”).

The life-cycle of the temple itself is enriched by a regular schedule of festivals throughout the year, celebration of which recapitulates for the thousands of participants events in the life of their Lord. Thus, Kṛṣṇa’s birthday is observed in the month of *Bhādrapada* (August-September); “Kṛṣṇāṣṭam,” a nine-day dance-drama re-enacting heroic deeds of Kṛṣṇa’s life, is performed also in August-September; “Kuchela’s Day,” remembering the Lord’s generosity to his poverty-stricken friend, is marked in the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December); “*Viśākha-vrata*,” a penitential vow joyfully undertaken to listen to stories of Kṛṣṇa’s exploits and to seek a special *darśana* of his face, is undertaken by throngs of devotees in April-May in observance of *Vaiśākha*-month, a time known to have been especially sacred to the Lord; and, a grand, 10-day festival is held in the month of *Phālguna* (February-March) that features processions with masses of elephants, and on the ninth day a spectacular dramatization of a “hunting expedition,” culminating

on the last day when a replica of the icon of the Lord is bathed in the temple tank immediately followed by mass-bathing by believers. So popular has the temple become as a center attractive to pilgrims that the inevitable consequence is also being observed: along with the devout pilgrims come also the undesirables and disreputable persons. The temple treasures have been vandalized, and even some images have been stolen (presumably for later sale on the lucrative foreign art-dealers' market). As a sign of the times, in June 1980 the temple authorities installed closed-circuit TV to detect looting and as preventative against further thefts.

So, for anyone who wishes to see Kṛṣṇa-worship as it has developed from its ancient roots to a relevant, living tradition today, here is a place—Guruvāyūr—where the Lord Kṛṣṇa resides as beloved Appan, a presence which elicits deep and devoted response from a wide spectrum of votaries from all over south India.

## 17

### **Raṅganātha**

One way of classifying images of Hindu deities is according to whether they are shown seated (*āsana*), standing (*sthānaka*) or lying down (*śayana*). Examples of the first two classes are found in many places elsewhere in this volume. The paramount example of a reclining deity is the Lord Raṅganātha, an aspect of Viṣṇu on his serpent-couch at Śrīraṅgam in the state of Tamil Nadu, south India. The mythological frame of reference for this depiction is that the Lord Viṣṇu rests eternally on his ageless attendant, the serpent Ādiśeṣa (Śeṣa/Ananta), who himself floats on the infinite milky ocean of existence. During the periods of Viṣṇu's wakefulness, the world as we know it in all its parts, is created then sustained. When Viṣṇu slumbers, the world as we know it in all its parts, resolves into its undifferentiated primordial condition. These



**Fig.17. Rāṅganātha**

conditions are referred to respectively as “*sṛṣṭi*” (creation), “*sthiti*” (maintenance) and “*pralaya*” (dissolution, a state of suspended animation). Many who see this recumbent deity perceive it as a depiction of the Lord entering into his periodic phase of deep sleep. Others view it, on the contrary, as the Lord rousing to a state of wakefulness. Often, Viṣṇu in this posture of repose is shown with another figure, his consort Śrī, who sits at his feet, massaging them. Even here, it could be construed either way—she could be soothing him into sleep, or stimulating him toward wakefulness. In fact, according to most traditional Hindu interpretations, the image of Viṣṇu so disposed is in the state of what is called “*yoganidrā*” (“yogic quiescence”), which is neither one nor the other, inasmuch as the Lord, although withdrawn from his surroundings, is nonetheless acutely aware of them. Even though this be “Kali Yuga” when, temporally speaking, all creation moves toward its destined end, the traditional emphasis has been to interpret his acute awareness as fastened on the task of sustaining the world.

Our line drawing (Fig. 17) is of the image housed in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Raṅganātha temple at Śrīraṅgam. The base of the gigantic stone icon is fashioned in the likeness of the coiled snake with five hoods. This serpent’s name “Śeṣa” means “remainder,” and alludes to that fact that this servant of the Lord remains with him even after all the worlds have been dissolved. The prefix “Ādi” (“first,” “premier”) merely emphasizes his primordial status. His other name “Ananta,” refers to his association with the infinite (*an* + *anta* = “unending”). Atop the coil, shielded by hoods spread out and suspended above him in protection, lies the Lord.

It is perhaps notable that Raṅganātha has two arms rather than four or more as in most depictions of Viṣṇu. In this temple the orientation of the image is such that the head of the deity is toward the west, and he lies on his right side facing south. The images of both Raṅganātha and Ādiśeṣa are frequently anointed so that both now are quite black and only dimly visible in the half light of the temple chamber where they together rest. The lower part of the Lord’s body is wrapped in



a radiant, yellow *dhotī*. The image is carved to show anklets, bracelets, biceps-ornaments and several necklaces. Among the latter is his fabled *Kaustubha*-jewel, originating in the milky ocean, and symbolic of his utter consciousness as the all-pervading Lord. At his neck also is placed a garland of fresh flowers, as is generally found on deities in shrines of temples where *pūjā* is performed regularly.<sup>11</sup> The two *yajñopavīta*-cords which are seen here may be construed to indicate his married status.<sup>12</sup> His right hand lies palm outward near his head. It thus serves the dual purpose of suggesting a support for his resting head and as an *abhaya*-gesture of "Fear Not". His left hand rests on his left flank in a *kaṭyavalambita*-pose ("supported by the hip"). His head, resting in a carved pillow, is crowned, and his forehead bears an *ūrdhva-puṇḍra* mark in the so-called "Y"-shape of the Tenkalai (southern) division of Śrī-vaiṣṇavism.

In front of the immovable stone image [*mūla-bera*] is a pedestal supporting three small metallic icons. These images [*utsava-bera*] are used for festival occasions; they are portable enough to be carried in processions. The middle figure is Viṣṇu in his form as "Para Vāsudeva" (called "Emberumāḷ" in Tamil). This is a mobile ("*jaṅgama*") representation of Raṅganātha;<sup>13</sup> it is also the form which Viṣṇu is said to assume in his highest heaven. On the right of this image is Śrī, on the left Bhū, personifications of the Lord's transcendent and mundane powers respectively. All three are draped in silken garments, as a token of respect accorded to divine images in the living Hindu tradition throughout India.

The temple which houses this image of Raṅganātha is one of the largest in all of India and one of the most sacred in the South. It is located in the town of Śrīraṅgam, whose name resonates with the same symbolic power as the name of the deity. The element "Raṅga" in both, refers to a "stage." The town Śrīraṅgam, then, is to be imagined as a stage, and is the Lord's pre-eminent place where he both acts out a divine drama and directs the activities of his supporting cast, all the while anticipating the responses of his audience (his devotees).

Raṅganātha is the "master" (*nātha*) of the stage. He is known for his many roles: in all of these he acts to save mankind. Even here, in his posture of repose, he is the One who in his sublime composure is acutely concerned for the welfare and sustenance of those who come to see him. As director of the drama, he manages from center-stage, as it were, the activities of all who assemble about him.

In Śrīraṅgam the temple and the town are so closely interlinked that it is virtually impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. The town is laid out on a plan by virtue of which the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple is at the exact center. Radiating out from this sacred center are *prākāras* ("enclosures" or "precincts") which in most temples are regular courtyards but, here, are entire sections of the municipality. Altogether, the Raṅganātha-temple—and the town of Śrīraṅgam—is comprised of seven such *prākāras*. Hence the town is the temple, and the temple is the town. This plan reflects in microcosm the terrestrial plane with its seven land masses radiating from a central island.<sup>14</sup> This imagery is enhanced by the fact that the town of Śrīraṅgam is itself an island set in the middle of the sacred Cauvery River. So, the "stage" of the Lord's activity is also, according to this imagery, the center of the world as we know it, radiating out in all directions from the island where Śrīraṅgam is situated—at the center of which is the *sanctum sanctorum* containing the ever-alert, reclining Lord.

This temple, then, which covers an area no less than three miles square, is probably the largest in all of India. While it does not match in wealth the temple complex at Tirupati devoted to Veṅkaṭeśvara [q.v.], it is nonetheless one of the great institutions of Hinduism. It possesses a great accumulation of jewels, most of which are used in adornment of the Lord Raṅganātha at different times of the year. It also boasts a library of ancient (and, for the most part, still uncatalogued) manuscripts. As well, the temple's holdings in real estate provide income sufficient to pay for the large staff of professional priests required for its on-going schedule of services. The gold-plated *vimāna*-roof above the *sanctum sanctorum* is only one of the more obvious tokens of the

temple's treasures and resources. And in the late 1980s, the westernmost *Rāja gopura*-tower begun several centuries ago, was completed, its many storeys making it the highest sacred structure in south India.

Just as the temple in Madurai dedicated to the *devī* Mīnākṣī [q.v.]<sup>15</sup> is a town of festivals all year long, so is Raṅganātha's temple at Śrīraṅgam the site of almost ceaseless celebrations. Each month throughout the year there are notable *utsavās* (holy festivals) which feature processions through the streets/*prākāras* of the town/temple. At the beginning of the year in *Caitra* (March-April; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Paikuṇi*), in an elaborate ceremony witnessed by temple images of *Āḷvārs* and *Ācāryas*, the Lord Raṅganātha is ushered from his sanctuary so that money bags may be offered to him, following which the new almanac for the year is read out to him. This is followed by one of the great annual festivals of that institution, a 10-day series of processions on different vehicles with different local destinations daily. This rich display attracts many thousands of pilgrims and devotees to the temple, especially since the 9th day re-enacts the divine marriage between Raṅganātha and the goddess Uṅgaiyūrvallī (Lakṣmī), and that ninth and the following tenth day is the only time all year the two divinities are seated and worshipped together. In a part of the nuptial celebrations which seems to date back several centuries, the famous composition by Rāmānuja [q.v.], the *Gadyatraya*, is recited in their presence. In *Vaiśākha* (April-May; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Cittirai*), during each of the ten days preceding the spring Full Moon, a car-festival is performed during which period the deity, profusely decorated with spring flowers, is taken out daily in procession atop a succession of marvellously crafted carts and palanquins. After observing a 1-day *Rāmanāvamī* tribute, there follows an 8-day *Brahmotsava* to honor the star of the god's consecration. During this month as well a 10-day festival commemorates the birth of the Śrī-*vaiṣṇava* saint Nammālvār [q.v.]. Later in *Jyeṣṭha* month (May-June; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Vaikāci*) another 8-day series of processions is displayed, featuring musical performances, among other things. And, somewhat later, a separate, 7-day seasonal celebration for the goddess. During *Āṣāḍha*-

month (June-July; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Āṇi*) there is magnificent *abhiṣeka*-bath given to the deity using 1000 jars containing sacred waters, followed by massive distributions of food to the poor. In *Śrāvaṇa*-month (July-August; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Āḍi*), when the Cauvery River reaches its peak flood stages, under the supervision of the deity the river is placated by various valuables thrown into its rushing currents. The month of *Bhādrapada* (August-September; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Āvaṇi*) witnesses two festivals, the 2-day celebration of Kṛṣṇa's birth and a 9-day "*Pavitrotsava*"-cycle. In the month of *Āśvina* (September-October; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Puraṭṭāci*), emanating from the goddesses' chambers, is Śrīraṅgam's version of "*Navarātri*," the contours of which pan-Indian celebration have been outlined elsewhere in this volume. This 9-day celebration is followed by visits by Lord Raṅganātha to nearby temples. Also featured during this span is a re-enactment of an ancient episode from local lore in which the Lord, mounted on a horse-like vehicle, goes "hunting" and "slays" a demon. Throughout the month of *Kārttika* (October-November; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Aippaci*), the temple elephant is used to transport water from the Cauvery River to the inner temple, using vessels of pure gold. During this same month, also, there are two "swing festivals," one lasting nine days for Raṅganātha, the other seven days for the goddess, as well as a "festival of lights." As part of the latter, new vestments are placed upon the many subsidiary icons of deities and saints throughout the temple. *Kārttika* is also the month when the temple commemorates the anniversary of Lord Raṅganātha taking up residence at Śrīraṅgam in ancient days.<sup>16</sup> In the month of *Mārgaśīrṣa* (November-December; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Kārttikai*), when the nights are long and their coolness is noticed, illuminations—including, on one night, a huge bonfire—light up the temple-precincts at night and, in a separate but related liturgy, the deity is adorned with 360 garments. Also, a drama is played out recollecting how once, many years ago, Tirumaṅkai Ālvār summoned Nammālvār to come to this very temple to sing and to conduct special rites to the Lord.

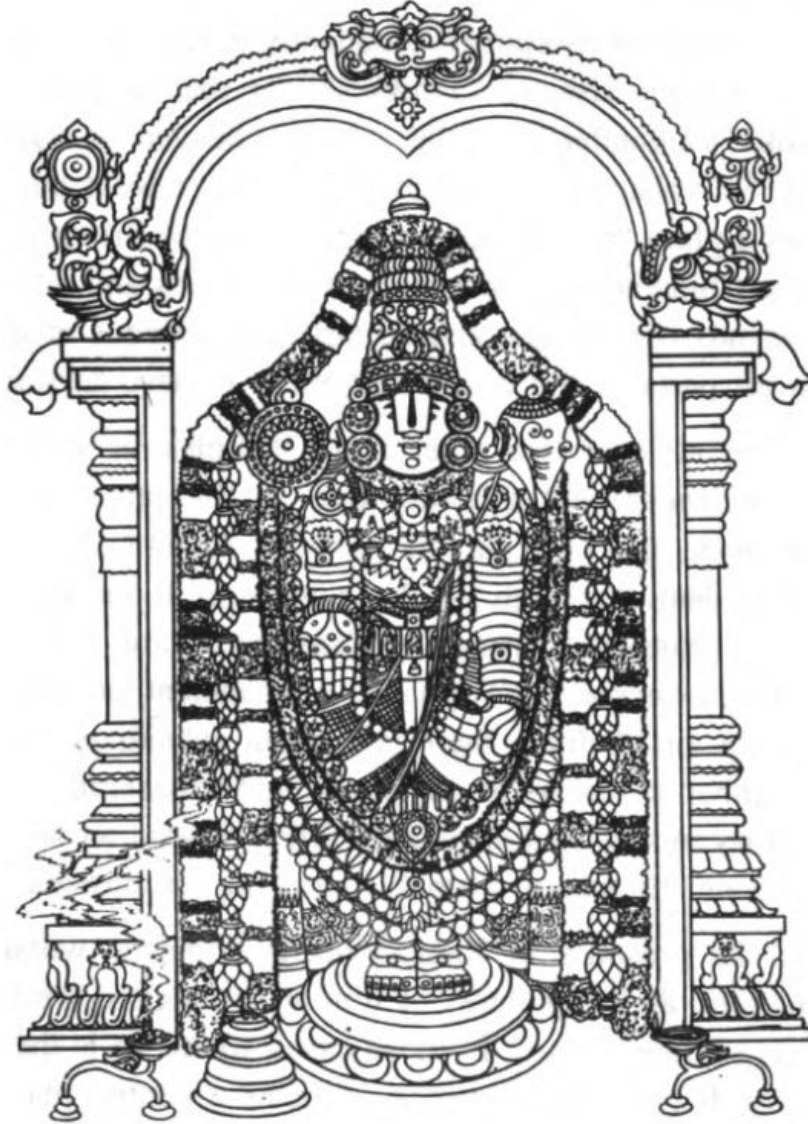
On the full-moon day of this month [*pūrṇimā*], the deity is presented with the account books of the temple for approval. During *Pauṣa*-month (December-January; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Mārkaṭi*), there is a step-up of significant celebrations throughout the temple, prominent among them a 20-day *Adhyayanotsava* series of recitations from the Śrī-*vaiṣṇava* treasury of devotional verses. The first ten days consist mainly of readings from Āṭvārs' collections, but culminate on the 10th night as the Lord's image is disguised as the female temptress Mohini whose glittering costume, among other features, attracts milling throngs of temple visitors. Then a one-day hiatus marks *Vaiṣṇava Ekādaśī*, when the image of the Lord is carried through the north gateway of the second *prākāra*—closed to one and all throughout the year except for this and the succeeding ten days—followed by thousands of devotees, mostly pilgrims, who gravitate to the temple to pass likewise through that special gate on that auspicious day. This is one of the great spectacles in that part of the world. The second ten days, comprised largely of recitations, culminate on the last day with the commemoration of the transfiguration of Nammāṭvār [*Nammāṭvār mokṣa*]. In this, the saint's image is placed face-down so that his head touches the feet of the Lord's image whereupon *tulasī* leaves are poured over his head and the Divine Feet. The following month is *Māgha* (January-February; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Tai*), when there is a 10-day sacred cycle during which the deity is taken out in daily procession in a fashion similar to the one nine months earlier. *Phālguna*-month (February-March; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Māci*) features a floating festival, that is to say, a 10-day period on the 8th and 9th evenings of which the deity is decked out on a special, illuminated barge and given rides around the temple tank. On the final night of this "Teppam" festival, both it and the entire liturgical year reach a spectacular climax when the deity, carried through the streets surrounding the temple on a vehicle shaped like the shining sun, passes through a flaming course lined on either side by a hundred or more torch-bearers.

The day-to-day liturgies of the temple at Śrīraṅgam are conducted

according to the rules laid down in the venerated manuals known as "Pāñcarātra Āgamas."<sup>17</sup> The professional priests who conduct the cultic affairs of the temple belong to the division of the Śrī-vaiṣṇava sect known as "Teṅkalai" (southern) school. They are recognised by the "Y"-shaped mark they wear on their foreheads, similar to the one already seen on the forehead of Raṅganātha's image. The term used for this division of Śrī-vaiṣṇavism reflects what was once a regional feature, with the southern group having its headquarters at Śrīraṅgam, and the other group farther north, called "Vaṭakalai" ("northern") with its cultic center at Kāñcīpuram. These cultic divisions also reflect essential differences in theology and in the practice of the devout life of their respective votaries.

The exact age of the Śrīraṅgam-temple is not known. Much of its architectural style dates to a period between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, or even later. However, the medieval saints of the Śrī-vaiṣṇava tradition, known as "Ālvārs," dating from the third(?) to the ninth centuries C.E., all mention Lord Raṅganātha's abode. That its history reflects both high and low periods is amply illustrated by a few citations. It served as the headquarters for several great figures in Śrī-vaiṣṇava history—Yāmuna (tenth century C.E.), Rāmānuja (early twelfth century C.E.), Parāśara Bhaṭṭa (mid-twelfth century C.E.), all ruled as pontiffs here. In the thirteenth century C.E., the area was occupied by militantly iconoclastic Muslims and for two or three decades they succeeded in suppressing the traditional forms of Hindu worship here. During this period of domination and persecution by their Muslim overlords, the resident devotees of Raṅganātha managed to erect a false wall in the *sanctum sanctorum* behind which was successfully concealed the recumbent stone image of Raṅganātha. Thus it was saved from the mutilation visited upon the Hindu images elsewhere in the country. The *utsavabera*-images from the sanctuary—"Namberumāl" and his two consorts ("Ubhaya-nācciyār", a dual term in mixed Sanskrit and Tamil for Śrī and Bhū together)—were spirited away from Śrīraṅgam and for a number of years were kept in hiding by devotees in such places as nearby Trichy, Gingee,





**Fig.18. Venkatesvara (Bālāji)**



Kāñcīpuram and Tirupati. In due time, these were restored to their rightful place at the side of Lord Raṅganātha in his reclaimed sanctuary.

Śrīrangam now serves as a rallying point to the Śrī-vaiṣṇavas of south India. Some of its epithets eloquently testify to its place in regional piety. It is known also as "Tirukkoil," or the "glorious temple," and as "Bhūloka Vaikuṇṭha," or "the supreme heaven on earth." It is said that every Śrī-vaiṣṇava should go and spend at least one night there.<sup>18</sup> It occupies a place in the religious imagination of Śrī-vaiṣṇavism similar to the place Chidambaram occupies among Śaivas and, like it, Śrīrangam also transcends regionalism and sectarianism. Hindus of all persuasions and from all parts of the country go there to have *darśana* of the deity.

There are at least two other major temples in south India to the Lord in his recumbent attitude, one in the state of Karnataka at Śrīraṅgapaṭṇam, the other in the state of Andhra Pradesh at Nellore. It seems evident that both of these were built on the model of the original at Śrīrangam. Shrines to Raṅganātha are found in numerous temples. For example, at Triplicane—an ancient portion, now part of the inner city, of Madras—there is a small subsidiary shrine to the left of the chamber of the main deity at the Pārthasārathi Temple, where devotees may resort to Raṅganātha. There is also an ancient temple for Raṅganātha on the top of a small hillock at Tirunirmalai near Madras.

As for the presence of Raṅganātha in domestic worship, miniature images of him, and/or pictures of him at Śrīrangam, are found in many Śrī-vaiṣṇava home-shrines. In those cases where he is the "*kula-devatā*" ("hereditary deity"), this presence occupies a central place in the *pūjā*-cupboard. In other cases where the householder honors another deity, either as "*kula-devatā*" or as "*iṣṭa-devatā*" ("chosen deity"), Raṅganātha's replica will be given a prominent, though subordinate, place. An interesting symbolic presence in all Śrī-vaiṣṇava domestic shrines is that the shrine itself is referred to as "Koil-Ālvār". In this, the word "Ālvār" simply means "holy" and is added as an honorific. The word "Koil" refers to the sacred shrine, namely, Śrīrangam. For, the worship performed

at Śrīraṅgam is paradigmatic for worship done anywhere by Śrī-vaiṣṇavas.

The feeling of reverence for this deity is reflected in names given to children. So it is then, that men will bear such names as: Raṅganātha, Raṅgasvāmi, Raṅgarāja, Raṅgabhaṭṭa, Raṅgayya, Raṅgappa, Raṅga Rao etc., and Namberumāl. Women, likewise, bear the name of his consort, or a feminine equivalent with the Lord's name—e.g., Raṅganāyaki, Raṅgammā(1), Raṅgamaṇi, Raṅgaśāyī, etc.

## 18

### **Veṅkaṭeśvara (Bālāji)**

Of all the temples in India—north, south, east or west—the richest and most popular is undoubtedly that of “Bālāji” Veṅkaṭeśvara. Every day thousands of pilgrims converge from all parts of India to the teeming town of Tirupati, situated on a barren plain in southern Andhra Pradesh state. From there they commence the final scale to the spectacular peak of one of the “seven hills,” most holy among the many craggy eminences that jut abruptly up from the desolate countryside. Even the town of Tirupati at the base of the cliffs upon which the deity dwells has absorbed some of the sacrality associated with the Lord of the mountain shrine, for its name refers literally to the “holy” or “preeminent” or, simply, “*the*” [*tiru-*] “Lord” himself [*-pati*] (or, the “Consort” [*-pati*] of “Lakṣmī” [*-tiru*]). As with many pilgrimage centers, the devotees’ destination was once hard to reach;<sup>19</sup> but in recent decades new roads, express trains, air-conditioned buses, and an airport have combined to make this spot located some 85 miles inland and north from Madras City easier to reach than in former years. Even the trek to the holy mountain—once accomplished by the arduous ascent up what is now an all but abandoned seven-mile stairway-trail [*sopāna-mārga*]<sup>20</sup>—is assisted by fleets of buses, owned by the Temple Trust, and plying at one-to-two-minute intervals relatively new, skilfully engineered roads. Finally atop the mountain, at the penultimate goal of their quest, the

pilgrims come to Tirumalai, a village that is a temple, a temple that is a village—"holy" [*tiru-*] "mountain" [*-malai*]<sup>1</sup>—where Veṅkaṭeśvara ("Lord" [*īśvara*] of the holy mountain called Veṅkaṭa) abides. His image, to gaze at which is the consummate end of their journey of faith, is located there in the shrine of the temple situated in a peaceful, cool and verdant hollow high above the hot lowlands.

Who is the Lofty Lord, this Colossus atop the Cliffs, this Veṅkaṭeśvara? Evidently an ancient deity. Popular piety today proclaims that he is none other than Viṣṇu; yet there is a persistent priestly legend, to which local tradition lends its additional lore, and which is further attested to by the peculiarities of worship observed here,<sup>20</sup> that the *sanctum sanctorum* shelters Subrahmaṇya, son of Śiva; and, to complicate matters further, accounts found in the hymns of some of the earliest Ālvārs indicate that the image is, rather, the Almighty's manifestation as Hari-Hara (a combination of Viṣṇu and Śiva). Mystery seems, to be sure, at the very matrix of this powerful deity's identity. We shall assume, as does popular faith, that this Majestic Mountain Manifestation is an aspect of Viṣṇu.

Accordingly, we acknowledge the testimony that tells, in several puranic accounts, how Viṣṇu, at the beginning of the Kali Yuga age, characteristically decided to come down from heaven in order that his presence might be permanently visible to save his devotees by blessed *darśana* of him. So that both the heavenly hosts of immortal beings and the earthly masses of mortal humans could "see" him at the same time and in the same place, he chose the lofty peaks of Tirumalai—thus situating himself halfway between heaven and earth. With the agreement of Varāha, lord of the land thereabouts, he secured a perpetual lease for the mountain promontories. On his way to take up residence there, so the stories go, he quite by accident saw, fell in love with, and married a girl called Padmāvatī, daughter of one Ākāśarāja of Nārāyaṇavanam, not far from the modern city of Madras. So smitten was he that he forgot to tell her he was already married to the goddess Lakṣmī [*q.v.*]; and,

of course, in his passion he neglected to tell Lakṣmī of his conquest. When Padmāvatī learned the truth, her humiliation prompted her to retreat to a place now known as Alarmelmaṅgāpuram, or Tiruchānūr—about three miles from Tirupati. As for Lakṣmī, the insult left her no alternative but to withdraw north to Kolhāpur (in Maharashtra State). So it was, then, that Veṅkaṭeśvara was abandoned by both his spouses, and thus it is, now, that he is seen to stand alone in solitary splendor in his hill shrine. This is but another anomaly of his presence here; for, elsewhere, normally, images of Viṣṇu are displayed with the divine consorts flanking him on either side. Likewise, this legend accounts for the origin of the tradition observed by many pilgrims to visit first the small shrine housing an image of Varāha, the titular landlord of the place, before they go inside the temple housing the honored Lord of the Hilltop.

As indicated by the accompanying line drawing (Fig. 18), the image of the Lord Veṅkaṭeśvara does, indeed, stand alone. The actual image found in the shrine, the *sthānaka-bera* ("standing image"), is impressive: it is about six feet tall and, when the lotus-base pedestal [*padma-piṭha*] and the *kirīṭa*-crown elements are added, the dimensions exceed nine feet. Although only two arms are clearly visible, nonetheless the image is known to have four arms—the upper pair appearing to hold the discus and conch in his right and left hands respectively, and his lower right and left hands indicating respectively that for those true believers who resort to His feet and take refuge in His Merciful Company the "*samsāra*" ocean of life (with all its sufferings, its trials and tribulations) will be as but a ford knee-deep, easy to cross. The mute gestures by which these statements are conveyed are called *varada-hasta* (his lower right hand) and *kaṭyavalambita-hasta* (his lower left hand). The image appears to be made of black granite—at least the stone surface has been made black and glossy over the centuries by having been constantly coated with civet oil. But this black base can scarcely be seen, for the entire image is so exuberantly covered with decorations and costly ornamentations that hardly a space is left unadorned.

The feet, arms and hands are set in gold/silver coverings studded with gems. Under the icon's feet the lotus-shaped pedestal glistens in pure gold. From the waist downward the body is covered with costly silk, which is all but obscured, however, by the various necklaces and garlands that drape down from the neck and shoulders to the breast, waist, and below. They include low-reaching, multiple strands of pure gold sovereign coins; a garland of gold-encased *śālagrāma*-stones [q.v.], each one about the size of a large plum; another that contains 1000 coins, each of which is engraved with a different one of the Lord's 1000 names; yet another of 108 gold plaques, each with the goddess Lakṣmī's image engraved upon it; and fragrant, fresh floral festoons that reach to the floor, and which are changed so often that they never have time to wilt. At his waist, vertically tucked beneath a golden girdle depicting the *daśavatāra*-incarnations of the Lord, is a sword called "*Sūryakaṭārī*." On his right side the "*makara-kaṇṭhī*" (crocodile mouth) broach is almost hidden by a gem-studded stole. On his left side an *upavīta*-cord and a generous, flowing, golden tape droop from his shoulder and cross his lower body toward the right thigh and calf. At chest level can be seen a huge emerald pendant called "*meru-paccai*," a stone about three inches in diameter and reputed to be the biggest such gem in the world. On his breast, right and left respectively, are sculpted gold discs depicting Lakṣmī and Padmāvatī. Both biceps are encircled by ornaments featuring striking multi-headed cobra motifs [*nāgas*], and, above those, on his right and left shoulders respectively, are the *cakra*-wheel and the *śaṅkha*-conch emblems which signify the sacred scars of the *tāpa*-sacraments. At his throat is a necklace featuring tiger-claws mounted in a gold case.

Bulky earrings frame the face which bears a lustrous, white *ūrdhvapuṇḍra*-mark of a pungent and costly camphor paste called *pacca-karpūram*—a mark the design of which is neither a sectarian Tenkalai "Y"-sign nor a sectarian Vatakalai "U"-sign but one, rather, that obscures the entire forehead, eyes, nose and half the cheeks and is, therefore, a

uniquely non-sectarian symbol.<sup>21</sup> The chin is also touched with the same paste and, according to tradition, this is done to cover a wound which the Lord sustained when, unrecognized, an otherwise devoted but exasperated gardener struck him with a spade during one of his periodic appearances as a human. The head is crowned by a magnificent diadem of gold, some twenty inches high and studded with all manner of precious stones as befits the Lord of Lords. The entire image is surrounded by a large *prabhā*-frame surmounted by a *kīrti-mukha* ("Face of Glory") that spews forth the aureole of creation.

To this figure, then, pilgrims throng. Here is God on earth, willing to release men from their course of sorrow. Here, he has come; here, he stands ready to help. His grace will shower upon the faithful who approach him in self-surrender. And so, "Bālāji" Venkateśvara—whose very nickname of endearment echoes that of one of his devotees to whose rescue he came as a confirmation of his reliability and partiality when dealing with friends—is the center of a cult of those who approach him for mercy and blessings. Some come on foot, in fulfillment of a vow, so that their sincerity may be recognized and rewarded by the Lord. A few have even been known to go to the extreme of climbing the holy hill on their knees. In most cases, however, the modern pilgrim resorts to other expedients to demonstrate his faith and to deserve the Lord's benign attention—the most common practice being to come with a gift, something affordable to present to the deity. Quite prominent, therefore, at this temple (more so than at any other) is the "*hundi*"—receptacle into which are thrust all kinds of free-will offerings. The collections from this *hundi*-box amount to hundreds of thousands of rupees every month. It occupies a full-time staff of accountants to sort out and verify the collection of coins and bank-notes, securities and wills, even lottery tickets and IOU's. Also common at Tirumalai is the act of offering one's hair—especially for women their crowning glory, but no less a dramatic gesture for children and most men—in a symbolic act of self-sacrifice that will, it is hoped, win for the tonsured

pilgrim a coveted place before the Lord. Further, special facilities are at all times available for weighing a person against some precious commodity in fulfillment of the promise to give one's own body's weight equivalent in fruits, or in butter, or in currency, or in gold, as an offering to the Lord's *hundi*.

And what blessings are sought? Health. Cure from chronic illness. A better life. The blessing of children. A safe journey for travel abroad. A passing mark in an examination.

Veṅkaṭeśvara is a pan-Indian god, popular both among Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas regardless of their caste origins. The formal liturgies conducted by the priests there, however, are done according to the strict guidelines laid down in the Vaikhānasa Āgama texts with some, but very few, aberrations allowed from those long-established Vaiṣṇava canons of worship. Daily the temple is opened at 2:30 a.m., and it remains open all day until half-past midnight. During those hours an extraordinary number of spectacular liturgies are performed—almost all of which are done as queues of pilgrims file past the sanctuary door to glimpse the god who has guided them there. First, the Lord is awakened while priests intone sweet-sounding *stotras* of praise [*suprabhātam*];<sup>22</sup> then, for the first time among many to follow throughout the day, the image of the deity is freshly garlanded [*tomāla-sevā*]; later, in a perpetually renewed effort to bring back to his side his estranged consorts, a marriage rite is celebrated [*kalyāṇa-utsava*]; lastly, shortly after midnight, "Bālāji" is put to rest [*pavalimpu-sevā*]. On certain days of the week, special rites are regularly introduced, Saturday being a unique day especially marked with festive observances in honor of Veṅkaṭeśvara; further, there are semi-monthly [*pakṣotsava*] and monthly [*māsotsava*] celebrations that are observed here with more éclat than at almost any other temple in the land. And, there are four great, annual festivals [*brahmotsava*] that continue, non-stop, for ten or more days, the two most noteworthy ones being those conducted in the Indic Amānta months of *Caitra* (March-April) and *Bhādrapada* (August-September); during those periods the



influx of pilgrims increases an incredible hundred fold above the normally impressive crowds who flock to the holy hill.

Veṅkaṭeśvara's worship is not limited solely to the Tirupati-Tirumalai sacred complex, although that is the main place of his worship. Small shrines dedicated to the Lord in this form are found in many temples throughout the length and breadth of India. Larger temples to Veṅkaṭeśvara can be found scattered about India, like the one in the Fanaswadi quarter of Bombay City. And, a number of "little Tirupatis" are found here and there, especially on certain hillocks in Andhra Pradesh. There is one called Dvārakā-Tirumali (near Eluru, north east of Vijayawada), another at Gokavaram (near Rajahmundry, farther northeast on the same road), yet another still farther up the coast near the seaport of Visakhapatnam, and still another further inland in the north-central part of the state—a shrine dating back to well before the thirteenth century—in a village called Annapureḍḍipalli. Pilgrimages to such places may, under special circumstances, be considered the equivalent of going to the more distant sacred site. There are now even Veṅkaṭeśvara temples in such far away cities as Pittsburgh,<sup>23</sup> Chicago, New Orleans and Dallas to serve Indians in the North American diaspora who wish to worship the "Lord of the Mountain."

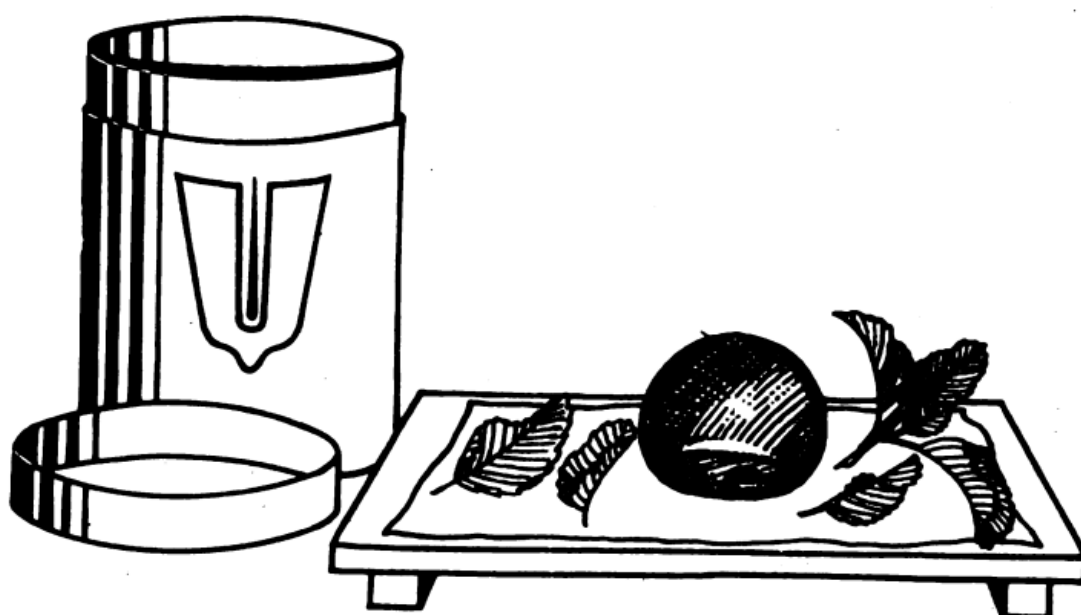
Wherever one goes in south India one sees evidence of the vibrant faith in this immediately recognizable image of "Bālāji." His picture—similar to the line-drawing accompanying this essay—is found in homes, appropriately garlanded with fresh flowers; it is found in shops, gently touched with scented paste in recapitulation of the worship daily afforded the Lord in his hilltop sanctuary; it is even found in plastic replicas on automobile dashboards or as a colorful decal on car windows, betokening his esteemed regard for those who travel in His Name. The widespread visibility of this deity—and the devotionism it denotes—seems only to be exceeded by the far-flung programs of philanthropy and uplift schemes initiated by the visionary trustees of what is, reputedly, and undoubtedly is, the most richly endowed abode of god [*devasthāna*] in all of India.

## 19

**The Sālagrāma-Stone**

Reverence for certain natural objects has long been a feature of Hinduism. Mountains, caves, rivers, forests, trees and plants as well as animals—all these have received veneration at one time or another by Hindus of one persuasion or another. In this essay we consider some natural, “found” objects—specifically, stones and unrefined ore—which are transmuted by faith into hallowed relics worthy of worship. According to those who resort to them, these lithomorphic shapes fully disclose the power and plenitude of their chosen deity.

The *sālagrāma*-stone is but one instance in which Hindu worship is directed to a piece of natural stone. The divine identity ascribed to it is Viṣṇu in merely one or more of his many manifestations. Just so, the *bāṇa-līṅga* is an egg-shaped piece of quartz believed to be a “found” variety of the *Śiva-līṅga* [q.v.], Śiva’s gracious presence—a “sign” to true believers of his generating presence in all of creation. In the same manner, the goddess Ambikā’s being is believed to be visible in the lustrous, golden-colored “found” object, high in ore content, known as a *suvarṇamukhī*. “Found” shapes of crystal, likewise, are taken by worshippers of Sūrya to be his shining form on earth, and are called *sphaṭikas*. And, last but not least among the aniconic shapes drawn from the natural order of “found” rocks and minerals, is the *śoṇabhadra*, a spheroid of red quartz or jasper associated with Gaṇapati [q.v.]. Each is said to be found only in the bed of a specific river. Authentic *sālagrāmas* are said to come only from the Gaṇḍakī River, which flows from Nepal through northern Bihar to become a tributary of the Ganges; authentic *bāṇa-līṅgas* are said to come only from a particular place in the Narmadā River in the state of Madhya Pradesh; authentic *suvarṇamukhīs* are said to come only from the river of that same name, near the temple town of Śrī Kālahasti, in the southern tip of the state of Andhra Pradesh; authentic *sphaṭikas* are said to come only from the site of a dried-up river bed [?] at Vellam, not far from Tanjore,



**Fig.19. Śālagrāma-Stone**

in the state of Tamil Nadu; and authentic *śoṇabhadras* are said to come only from a tributary of the Ganges known as the River Son in the state of Bihar.

As “found” objects of the natural order of creation, the merit which accrues to one who worships them is equal to—according to many, is far superior to—the merit which comes from worshipping man-made images. None of them requires the elaborate sanctification rites prescribed for man-made images to make them fit to receive worship; one may commence using one of them in devotional routines immediately upon receiving it (from whatever the source). Hence, they find a welcome place in domestic worship. And, of those named, the *śālagrāma*-stone and the *bāṇa-līṅga*, at least, find as well a place in the more elaborate ritual settings of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva temples, respectively.

In addition to the fact that each of the five evokes extraordinary awe from Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Śāktas, Sauras and Gāṇapatyas respectively,<sup>24</sup> all of them are highly regarded also by Smārtas. “Smārtas” are those who, in their routines of domestic worship, keep alive certain traditions [*smṛti*, whence the name “Smārta”] of a tolerant and broad-ranging nature, and are thereby persuaded to affirm the divine nature of all of the five deities, Viṣṇu, Śiva, the Goddess, Sūrya and Gaṇapati.<sup>25</sup> They are known to perform what is called “*pañcāyatana-pūjā*” at home—insofar as they are, practically speaking, able to do so. “*Pañcāyatana*” is a term used to refer collectively to the five [*pañca*-] “found” objects about which we have been speaking—the *śālagrāma*, the *bāṇa-līṅga*, the *suvarṇamukhī*, the *sphaṭika*, and the *śoṇabhadra*—as manifestations of divinity [*-āyatana*, “modality, presence, manifestation; abode, support, altar”]. In their daily worship [*pūjā*] at home, then, the Smārtas endeavor to honor the five “found” objects—or as many of them as may be available.<sup>26</sup>

In the South, then, the *śālagrāma* will be found in three places. First, in Smārta homes it is one among several other paraphernalia of worship—if, indeed, it has not been substituted by a picture of some Vaiṣṇava deity according to a rationale similar to that which causes

displacement of the *sphaṭika* by another representation. If it is there, it is likely to be afforded special attention only on Thursdays.<sup>27</sup> Second, it finds a place in Vaiṣṇava temples where, assuming a place of honor at the feet of the main deity, it is given precedence in all honors advanced to any icons housed there. Thus the *śālagrāma*-stone in a temple is worshipped as many times per day as the main image, and is also given priority in all special liturgies and festive offerings. Third, the *śālagrāma* is found in many Vaiṣṇava homes, where it is always warmly received and tenderly treated—often for generations. In some cases it is the only object used for the worship of the all-pervading influence of Viṣṇu; in other cases it is given priority of place in all offerings prepared for other household deities (e.g., Rāma or Hanumān or Kṛṣṇa or Venkaṭeśvara, or some combination of these and other Vaiṣṇava deities, plus whatever other divine presences share the *pūjā* cupboard, like a *nāga*-image or a saint's relic or picture, etc.). Mādhvaites, who follow the teachings of the thirteenth century philosopher-saint Madhva [q.v.], are reputed in particular to be ardent in their worship of the *śālagrāma*. Our line-drawing (Fig. 19) shows a typical *śālagrāma*-stone as it might be observed, however, during worship in a Tenkalai Śrī-vaiṣṇava home shrine.

In our drawing the cannister, which normally stores the *śālagrāma*-stone when it is not being worshipped, is uncovered. Its side displays the "Y"-shaped mark characteristic of the Tenkalai sect. Tenkalais, Vāṭakalais and Mādhvaites are all fond of sanctifying implements and accoutrements of worship with their respective sectarian marks. In some houses the modest cannister shown in our picture would be replaced by a lidded box, more or less impressively constructed. The *śālagrāma*-stone itself is never set on a bare shelf or table; as here, it is placed on a small piece of white or turmeric-dyed cloth. In turn, the cloth will often be placed upon a special plank or platform as a further sign of respect. The *tulasī*-leaves shown in the drawing indicate that *pūjā* will already have commenced. Other items which would be offered during daily rites to the *śālagrāma* include: water and milk libations

for cleansing it; daubs of sandalwood-paste and/or other powders for decoration; incense, flaming wicks, flowers and foodstuffs as offerings, etc. All the while *mantras* or *stotras* or *vacanas* will be uttered in praise of the Lord Viṣṇu who makes himself known in diverse ways to humankind.

*Śālagrāma*-stones are generally black and shiny. They often feature indentations and bulges. As well, they normally display holes in the form of sworls—in reality, fossilized traces of tiny molluscs. There is a sophisticated lore attached to what the holes, bumps, and notches “mean”—certain configurations are equated with specific manifestations of Viṣṇu.<sup>28</sup> It takes an expert in that lore to “identify” any given *śālagrāma*-stone with its corresponding aspect [*mūrti*] of Viṣṇu, but the “identification” is necessary, and it must be accurate. For, in turn, that identity equates with a prescribed set of rituals which must be utilized in the worship of the stone—not the least important detail of all this pertaining to the ability to address the object of veneration by its correct name. If, for example, the *śālagrāma* is identified as “Kṛṣṇa,” that means the household cycle of worship must include holy days sacred to Kṛṣṇa—like his birthday in *Bhādrapada* month (August-September). Different aspects of Viṣṇu worshipped in the *śālagrāma*-form are also associated with specific benefits; for example, if the stone is “identified” as Matsya, the fish incarnation of Viṣṇu, prosperity should attend the successful worshipper. A person, then, may undertake to worship in all propriety a specific kind of *śālagrāma*-stone, that is, one “identified” with a specific reward, in hopes of obtaining that desired benefit—long life, progeny, success, etc.

Because of the “power” believed to inhere in the “found” *śālagrāma*-stones, and because of the importance attached to specific “identifications” based on the infinite number of configurations possible to “read,” it is not surprising that some *śālagrāma*-experts, so called, have been known to prey on the innocent beliefs of the devout. There is even traffic in fake *śālagrāma*-stones. Accordingly, elaborate precautions have been worked out in popular practice in accepting a stone, as well as



**Fig.20. Nammālvār**



in accepting an attributed "identity."

It is possible to buy *śālagrāma*-stones. But consumer beware! Most stones are acquired through known sources. Many are inherited, being passed down from father to son over a span of generations. It is important, in all homes, to be assured that a *śālagrāma* represents a benign aspect of Viṣṇu. This is possible for a layman to judge only by assessing the results of prolonged worship of a given stone by a personal friend or family member before accepting it from them. It is considered "unsafe" for most persons to worship a *śālagrāma* identified with a ferocious aspect of Viṣṇu—for example, Ugra-Narasimha (Viṣṇu's Man-Lion form in his Ferocious Aspect)—and, in order to avert "danger," such a stone, if it comes into one's possession, must be handed over permanently to a holy man willing to use his spiritual power to tame the beast, or to a temple where the dangerous potential of the stone will be offset by the overabundant presence of pacific powers pulsating throughout the place.

Temples often, in fact, acquire large numbers of *śālagrāma*-stones. For, in families where there is no issue to whom to pass on the stone, that it might enjoy uninterrupted worship, the practice is often to donate the *śālagrāma* to a temple. There, it will (hopefully) receive the priority of place in all the daily and festive offerings mentioned earlier. The *hundi*-offering boxes at temples like Tirupati often are used as receptacles for anonymously donated *śālagrāma*-stones. Such institutions are known to have periodic auctions of their excess stock of *śālagrāma*-stones. Such auctions provide many would-be worshippers of the "found" stones with a reliable source for purchase, usually at a reasonable price.

The name "*śālagrāma*" is reputed to derive from the name of an ancient village supposed to have been situated on the Gaṇḍakī River in Nepal where the stones originate. That village [*grāma*] got its name of old from the large stand of oak-like *śāla*-trees which grew in the vicinity. By the time of the composition of the Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata*, the name had already become synonymous with the "found" stones. The *purāṇas* offer a variety of explanations of why the *śālagrāma*

stones came to be pervaded by Viṣṇu's presence. Perhaps the explanation of greatest interest to readers of this volume is the one which relates Viṣṇu's willingness to be "found" in a natural object with a story associated with the subject of another essay. We close this present essay by reference to the story told about the origin of *tulasī*, the sacred basil plant [q.v.].

According to legend, then, the reason why Viṣṇu took the form of a stone was the result of a curse (*Śiva. P. "Rudra" V:41:43 et seq.*). Bṛndā, a sincere ascetic who fasted and watched, prayed and meditated on holy things, undertook her austerities out of love for Viṣṇu and devotion to her husband. All merit that she gained from her pious deeds she transferred to her beloved husband. But Viṣṇu to prevent the husband from acquiring undue spiritual power, which power he was in any case using to frustrate the Lord's designs, decided to incarnate in human form resembling Bṛndā's husband. So convincing was the earthly shape that Viṣṇu took that he was able to seduce her, thus deprive her of all her merit and, in turn, thus humiliate her husband. The injured Bṛndā, before she committed *satī*, cursed Viṣṇu to become a lowly stone for what he had done to her.

Curses in Indian lore are implacable, even for gods as powerful as Viṣṇu. In accordance with the inexorable law of righteousness, it was imperative that he comply with the terms of the curse. So he became the abased stone of Bṛndā's intention. But once having fulfilled the terms of the curse, there was nothing that stipulated he had to remain in that mundane state! That Viṣṇu remains from that day to this in such an accessible condition merely witnesses to his unstinting grace. He, the All-pervading One, not only still remains on earth as the original *śālagrāma*-stone, honoring Bṛndā's curse, but by his infinite power continues to effect his multiplication into countless *śālagrāma*-stones. As such he is easily to be "found" in the natural order of the world in which we live. All one has to do to reach out and touch that mysterious being, so subtle yet so astonishing in his design, is to "find" him where he is.

## Nammālvār

Just as many Śaivas of south India give special honor to certain medieval Śaivite saits called "*Nāyanmārs*," as we have already seen in our essay on Māṇikkavācakar [q.v.], so the Śrī-vaiṣṇavas of south India honor the lives and teachings of the twelve medieval Vaiṣṇava saints known as "*Ālvārs*." These Ālvārs flourished between the third(?) and the ninth centuries C.E., and include in their ranks seven Brahmins, two śūdras, a king, a tribal, and a woman. All were what we would characterize in modern parlance as mystics and ecstasies. So highly revered have these saintly Ālvār<sup>29</sup> figures been among Śrī-vaiṣṇavas for many centuries, and so extravagant has been the praise heaped on them through the many generations, that it is now almost impossible to reconstruct with any confidence the historical circumstances surrounding the lives and deeds of any one of them. What is beyond doubt, however, is that among Śrī-vaiṣṇavas today, as has also been the case for several centuries up to now, the one among the twelve Ālvārs who receives highest acclaim for his saintliness is Nammālvār—a name that is really an epithet meaning "Our Saint."

According to traditional hagiographical accunts, "Our Saint," Nammālvār, was born in a small village known long ago as Tirukkurukūr,<sup>30</sup> near the tip of south India. His parents were śūdras. They are said to have given him the name "Māran," a Tamil designation connoting that the individual so called is rapt in the memory of his past lives and remains transfixed. So unresponsive was the infant to normal stimuli, we are told, that the parents took him to the Polinduninrapirān Temple of their village to seek the guidance of Lord Viṣṇu. When they came into the temple-compound, so the story goes, the child scrambled from his mother's arms toward a tamarind tree growing there. According to legend, Nammālvār from that day to early in his adolescence remained immovable in the shade of that tree. He was in a state of deep, ecstatic trance.

The young Māran attracted visitors to that temple. Among them, one day, was a Brahmin who was also later to be included in the select company of the Āḷvārs. Seeing the lad in trance there, he prostrated to him, and from that day never left the side of Māran. The man's name was Maturakavi.

When he was about sixteen years of age, Māran stirred from his trance, and emerged from the temple. From the evidence of the almost 1300 poems which are attributed to him during the short span of his life, he sang about 36 temples in south India now held sacred among Śrī-vaiṣṇavas. For example, we know he visited Tirupati to see Lord Vaṅkaṭeśvara [q.v.] as well as Śrīraṅgam where dwells the lord Raṅganātha [q.v.]. But the days left to him were to be few. He passed away blissfully, or attained *paramapada*, when he was middle-aged. Thus, according to Hindu hagiological convention, he was "absorbed into the divine," or, in other words, he ascended to Viṣṇu's heavenly Vaikuṇṭha.

Our line drawing (Fig. 20) shows the youthful Nammāḷvār seated cross-legged under the tamarind tree associated in legend with him. Most depictions of the saint suggest the presence of this tree. Although he is given the usual iconic ornaments—bracelets, armlets, necklaces, and earrings—these reflect more the sentiment of his later votaries than they relate to anything important in his life. What is important to note is the absence in his depiction of both an *upavīta*-cord and an upper cloth. The absence of the former is explained by his origins as a *śūdra*, for, the ceremony of thread-investiture is reserved for those in the upper three ranks of Hindu society. The absence of the latter is somewhat more ambiguous, and may be attributed merely to the fact that he was too young to wear this garment. In its place is a small garland of *vakula*-flowers [Tamil: *magizam-pū*], the bloom of which he was known to be fond. He is shown with only two arms, a convention maintained in the depiction of human saints. The *mudrā* displayed by his right hand is known by several names; which one it is called depends upon

the iconographic significance attached to it. As the “*upadeśa*”-*mudrā* of initiation it refers to his acceptance of Maturakavi as disciple and, by extrapolation, to indicate his acceptance of all true believers as his devotees. As the “*jñāna*”-*mudrā* of supreme wisdom [*var.*, “*cin*”-*mudrā*] it refers to the inner vision which he enjoyed and which he has shared with us in his poetic compositions. As the “*vyākhyāna*”-*mudrā* it may be construed to refer to his exposition of faith articulated in his inspired utterances. His left hand, which sometimes holds a *pustaka*-manuscript to represent the collection of his utterances, called the “*Tiruvāymoḷi*,” is here held in what may be called the *arigikāra-hasta*. With it he beckons us to come to him.

On his forehead is a Vaiṣṇava “*ūrdhva-puṇḍra*” mark. As Nammālvār receives the adoration of all Śrī-vaiṣṇavas, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, Vāṭakalai or Teṅkalai, the mark is neither “U”-shaped nor “Y”-shaped but is, instead, neutral. This ambiguity of marking so that sectarianism is obviated has been noted already in our essay on Venkateśvara [*q.v.*]. In any case, the presence of either a Vāṭakalai or a Teṅkalai mark on this Ālvār is an anachronism. His career flourished long before such sectarian distinctions came into vogue. As for his knotted coiffure it may be, as some say, an identification of locality. It is possible also that it represents a vestigial *uṣṇīṣa*-bump symbolic of his status as a *jīvanmukta*. Whatever may be its explanation, the knotted hair appears to be standard in the iconography of Nammālvār—sometimes tilting to his left, sometimes tilting to his right.

Occasionally images of Nammālvār show one or more other figures standing in subordinate relationship to him. If there is but one figure, it is most likely to be identified as Maturakavi, his disciple. If there are two figures, they are probably to be identified with Nammālvār’s successors in the Śrī-vaiṣṇava saintly tradition, namely, Nāthamuni and Rāmānuja [*q.v.*].

Images of Nammālvār will be found in virtually every Śrī-vaiṣṇava temple of south India. Sometimes he will be given a shrine of his



**Fig.20. Rāmānuja**

own; sometimes he will share a shrine with other holy figures of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. Two annual festivals are dedicated to the memory of this celebrated saint. In the month of *Vaiśākha* (April-May), a 10-day festival remembers his birth. Each morning and evening of that period, his image is taken in procession accompanied by groups of men [*goṣṭhī*] who chant verses from the so-called "*Divyaprabandham*."<sup>31</sup> Later, in the month of *Pauṣa* (December-January), there is a 10-day festival during which is re-enacted Nammālvār's "death." During this period, only Tamil hymns drawn from the *Tiruvāymoḷi* are utilized (that being a collection of "utterances from the sacred mouth" of the saint himself). Nammālvār's "death" is dramatized by priests who carry his image into the *sanctum sanctorum* and there place it at the feet of Viṣṇu's image. The head of the image of Nammālvār is so arranged face-down so that the saint's head rests on the feet of the other image. Three or four priests then slowly chant some of his devotional stanzas while at the same time they gradually cover up his image with large quantities of *tulasī*-leaves. When his image is fully hidden from view, one of the priests (representing humanity?) petitions the Lord not to take Nammālvār out of sight forever. Another of the priests speaks (on behalf of the Lord) and assents to the request. Thereupon the image of Nammālvār is returned to his own shrine where, throughout the rest of the year, he is honored daily as part of the on-going liturgies of the temple.

On the domestic front, images or pictures of Nammālvār will be found in many Śrī-vaiṣṇava homes. He is worshipped on at least one day each year, already mentioned, that is, his birthday in *Vaiśākha*-month (April-May). The utterances of Nammālvār as preserved in the *Tiruvāymoḷi* are chanted at home, often on a regular basis, by both men and women.

The function of Nammālvār in the spiritual life of Śrī-vaiṣṇavas is to serve as a mediator between man and God. His own human devotion was considered so exemplary that it is a perfection toward which every pious Śrī-vaiṣṇava should himself strive. The words in which he himself



articulated his religious vision are so revered that it is considered sacrilege to treat them lightly in any way. Although the *Tiruvāymoli* has been translated into other languages, for purposes of utilizing it to help one move closer to God it must be recited aloud only in its Tamil original. Thus Śrī-vaiṣṇavas in the state of Andhra Pradesh who speak only Telugu, or those in the state of Karnataka who speak only Kannada, or those in Kerala who speak only Malayalam—or, for that matter, those in the United States who speak only English—must somehow learn to pronounce selections in Tamil from his compositions if they are to worship God in an effective manner.

In fact, everything about this saint is extraordinarily revered. Even his footprints in symbolic form are accorded a high place of honor. There is in Śrī-vaiṣṇava ritual, both at temples and in the home, a liturgical instrument the “meaning” of which is inextricably identified with “Our Saint.” It is used by an officiating priest or head of the family to bless the participants in a ritual by placing it momentarily on the head and shoulders of male devotees, and on the head only of female worshippers. That implement is a metallic, dome-shaped, tiered crown, on the top of which are mounted in miniature a pair of sandals. Those sandals are said to be where Nammālvār “stands.” Thus the act of allowing the dome-like instrument to touch the head is equivalent, liturgically, to abasing oneself at the saintly mediator’s feet. The name of this dome-shaped instrument is “Śaṭhakopa” or “Śaṭhāri.”<sup>32</sup> That name is construed several different ways within Śrī-vaiṣṇava tradition, but suffice to say here that by its touch one is simultaneously given strength to prevail against wickedness and evil while also being reminded of the saint whose name is also known to be “Śaṭhakopa” or “Śaṭhāri.”

Other names by which Nammālvār is known, in addition to Māran, Śaṭhakopa and Śaṭhāri are: Kārimāran, Parāṅkuṣa (“One who Goads his Rivals”), Śaṭhamarṣaṇa, Vakuḷābharāṇa and Vakuḷa-bhūṣaṇa (both of which mean “One who is Adorned by *Vakuḷa*-flowers”). Men in Śrī-vaiṣṇava families are sometimes namesakes of this saint.

## Rāmanuja

Rāmānuja's name in the West is associated with a school of Indian philosophy labelled "Qualified Non-Dualism" [*viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta*]. In India, however, his name conjures up other associations as well. In fact, his philosophical writings are viewed there as of subsidiary significance to his contributions as a medieval religious reformer and to his position as a saintly model. Those millions of Hindus who call themselves Śrī-vaiṣṇavas may be said to be heirs of the revised Hinduism he espoused and promulgated. Images of him are found in special shrines located within thousands of Vaiṣṇava temples throughout the South. Also, his likeness sculpted in metal or captured in artists' renderings will be found adorning the private shrines of many south Indian Vaiṣṇava homes.

According to traditional accounts, Rāmānuja<sup>33</sup> lived to be 120 years old. He was born of Brahmin parents in the year 1017 C.E., we are told, in a small village some 25 miles southwest of the city of Madras. The village prior to his birth was known as Bhūtapurī (Sanskrit) or Būtūr (Tamil), and in later years the honorifics "Śrī" and "Perum" were added, so that today the town is known on the maps as Śrīperumbūdūr.<sup>34</sup> As a youngster he was sent by his parents to the nearby city of Kāñcīpuram, 10 miles further inland, for traditional schooling. There he remained for several decades during which period he got married and maintained the life of a householder [*grhastha*]. His intellectual, spiritual and managerial excellence came to the attention of the then-reigning pontiff at the temple town of Śrīraṅgam. He was invited to become that pontiff's successor. A prerequisite for the pontifical office is that the candidate be a *saṁnyāsin*, that is, someone who has entered into the fourth stage of orthodox Hindu life, having left behind him his former marital status. It is not clear whether Rāmānuja took the vows of a renunciate in response to this invitation, or for reasons of his own. In any case, upon the death of the elderly pontiff, Rāmānuja went to Śrīraṅgam and assumed direction of that Holy See.

That Rāmānuja was liberal in his religious and social attitudes was already prefigured in some of the actions attributed to him during his life in and around Kāñcīpuram. For examples, he showed an exemplary willingness to learn from sources other than the most narrowly orthodox—one of his teachers, Tirukkacci Nambi, was from one of the lower castes. Also, when he was given the “secret” mantra of initiation by his preceptor, Goṣṭhīpūrṇa, with the specific warning that he would go to hell by imparting to one and sundry, it is said that he promptly climbed to the top of the temple-tower and shouted it for all to hear, explaining later that it were preferable to him to go to hell for that deed than for others to live in spiritual darkness; he wanted all to know the saving words.

When he found himself elevated to high office in Śrīraṅgam he was able to implement reforms within the fold of Śrī-vaiṣṇavism which reflected his liberal views. For one thing, he is remembered for championing the admission of outcastes into the inner circles of the faith. For another thing, he sponsored the use of the vernacular Tamil in the divine liturgies of temples, services which had been up to his times confined to the sophisticated language of Sanskrit known only to the learned few.

For his liberal stances he earned the condemnation of many. Even some of his disciples suffered physical torment at the instigation of the threatened, conservative establishment. At one point, early in the twelfth century, Rāmānuja himself found it advisable to go into hiding in order to escape retribution of the reigning Chola king. Accordingly, he migrated northwest to what is now known as Melkote, a small town in the state of modern Karnataka, where he remained for a twelve year period until the king died. Rāmānuja returned to Śrīraṅgam and for a period of twenty years he served the Śrī-vaiṣṇava community as pontiff of the Śrīraṅgam see. It was during those later years that he consolidated his reforms, institutionalizing them as established practices among the faithful. It was also only then that he could channel his considerable energies into the production of the literary works for which he is also remembered. Among the studies attributed to his most mature years are the so-called *Śrībhāṣya*, a commentary on the authoritative aphorisms of the ancient sage Bādarāyaṇa; the *Vedārthasaṅgraha*,

which is an exposition of some major points advanced in the Upaniṣads; and the *Gītābhāṣya*, an interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

Our line drawing is a likeness of the saint based upon one of the three metal images depicting him commissioned during his life-time. That one is found in the temple at Śrīperumbūdūr, the town of his birth. The other two—very similar to this one—are to be found at the two other places associated with his biography. At Melkote, the image of him is said to have been placed in its shrine during his last days. The third one, at Śrīraṅgam, installed during his reign as pontiff there, sits in front of another, larger likeness of the saint made of clay; both of these are found in the fourth *prākāra*-enclosure of that city's temple dedicated to Raṅganātha [q.v.]. There is a local tradition which claims that the clay image embodies under its surface the mortal remains of Rāmānuja.<sup>35</sup> This may or may not be true. Another tradition, for example, maintains that he was buried within the precincts of that same Śrīraṅgam temple, but not in that image form. There is also the well-known, though sadly neglected, place in nearby Tiruvāṇaikkāval, where Rāmānuja is said to be buried alongside two of his precursors, Yāmuna and Nāthamuni. Whatever be the case, the date assigned to his death at Śrīraṅgam is 1137 C.E.

Thus, when we turn to our line-drawing (Fig. 21) we see the figure as the saint himself wanted us to see him. Although his legs are not visible due to the cloth covering southern piety dictates for most divine images,<sup>36</sup> we know that he sits in a cross-legged position atop a pedestal. The pedestal is probably equipped with hooks for carrying the image in processions. His hands are held in the *añjali-hasta* to denote his attitude of adoration of the Lord Viṣṇu and his consort Śrī. Sometimes, in other depictions of Rāmānuja, the banner, at his right elbow here, is propped against his shoulder within the arc of his right arm. This banner is a sign of his status as a *saṁnyāsin*. In Śrī-vaiṣṇavism the staffs of such banners are invariably comprised of three sticks (*tridaṇḍa*) bound together. The number three is said to refer to the doctrinal concept that ultimate reality is perceived in three different modes, namely *cit* (animate beings), *acit* (inanimate objects), and *Īśvara* (the Supreme Being).<sup>37</sup>

His body is surrounded by the *upavīta*-cord falling from his left shoulder across his trunk and around his right hip. The presence of the *upavīta*-thread is a peculiarity among *saṁnyāsins* of the Śrī-vaiṣṇava orders, and symbolizes that for them, even though they have “left the world,” they are still very much a part of it. Unlike renunciates of Smārta and Śaiva orders, Vaiṣṇava *saṁnyāsins* are obligated to maintain their daily observances—e.g., *sandhyāvandana*-prayers, *pūjā*-routines, etc. The upright marks on his forearms and forehead represent the 12 such marks a Śrī-vaiṣṇava daily applies to his body at different points while invoking the protection of one of the twelve aspects of Viṣṇu respectively at each place. The precise shape of those marks differs according to infra-sectarian practices—the so-called “Vāṭakalais” use a mark which resembles more the letter “U,” and the so-called “Teṅkalais” use a mark which resembles more the letter “Y.” At his shoulders, right and left, are marks respectively indicating Viṣṇu’s discus [*cakra*] and conch [*śaṅkha*]. In Śrī-vaiṣṇava practice, it is still the practice to make an indelible imprint on the shoulders of aspiring devotees with a heated silver or copper implement. This practice of branding was part of a cluster of rites which marked their formal entry into the fold of the faith. Prerequisite for this initiation [*dīkṣā*] was faith only; caste [*jāti*] and community [*varṇa*], as well as gender, were irrelevant factors by comparison. Thus Śrī-vaiṣṇavism continues to honor Rāmānuja’s liberal teachings even today by offering to place these indelible marks [*tāpa*] on the shoulders of anyone who is ready to proclaim his/her true belief.

The image of Rāmānuja displays at the neck a double loop of *tulasī*-beads. This has a double meaning. Not only does it allude to the life of prayer through which the devotee [*bhakta*] keeps in continual touch with the Lord, but it also represents—because the *tulasī*-plant [*q.v.*] is dear to the Lord—all those acts of piety which are perpetually practiced to please Viṣṇu. Around the neck of the image is also a garland of fresh flowers, indicative of the worship accorded the figure of Rāmānuja in a Vaiṣṇava temple in the South. His long ear-lobes denote the saint’s longevity. The shaved head reiterates his status as a *saṁnyāsin*.<sup>38</sup>

At the feet of the image is a cultic instrument known as a “Śaṭhakopa”/ “Śaṭhāri.” It is a tiered, dome-shaped, metallic implement surmounted by a pair of miniature sandals. At the conclusion of *pūjā* routines in Śrī-vaiṣṇava temples and shrines wherever they are found, the *arcaka* in charge of the services grasps the implement at the top and offers to place the open end over the head (and shoulders) of the devotees who come forward for *prasāda* and blessings. The name “Śaṭhakopa,” and the empty sandals, commemorate the saint Nammālvār [q.v.] whose teachings and perfected life provide perpetual inspiration for the devout. Its placement at Rāmānuja’s feet suggests how fundamental to his own stance were the contributions of the earlier Tamil visionaries.

Rāmānuja’s birthday is celebrated each year in Śrī-vaiṣṇava temples throughout the South for a ten-day period during the first half of the lunar month *Caitra* (March-April). During this period the image of the saint is taken both morning and evening in procession around the precincts of the temple and/or in the streets surrounding it. Accompanying the image will be groups of men [*goṣṭhī*] who chant verses from the so-called “*Divyaprabandham*.” This is a collection of about 4,000 hymns in Tamil attributed to a number of saints [*Ālvārs*] who predated Rāmānuja and whose inspired utterances he succeeded in incorporating into his philosophy and the temple liturgies of his time, until then drawing exclusively from Sanskrit traditions. The hymns are still used today as essential elements of Śrī-vaiṣṇava worship both in temples and in the homes. As each morning and afternoon, respectively, the *goṣṭhī*-groups complete about 200 hymns, by the end of the ten-day period the entire “Tamil-Veda” (as the *Divyaprabandham* is sometimes also called) is recited. *Rāmānuja-jayantī*, or the saint’s birthday celebrations, are done with great *éclat* in Śrīperumbūdūr, the saint’s natal village.

Metal images, photographs of one of the three original likenesses of Rāmānuja, or artists’ sketches of the saint are found in many Śrī-vaiṣṇava homes throughout the South. Sometimes these are even given a prominent place among other *pūjā* paraphernalia. There are, however, no special rites associated with the figure of Rāmānuja on the domestic



front. His name, including many of his aliases, often form part of the names of Śrī-vaiṣṇava men—e.g., Rāmānujācārya, Lakṣmaṇa, Emberumānār, Yātirāja (or Ethirāja), etc. Many pious Śrī-vaiṣṇavas adorn their letters to fellow Śrī-vaiṣṇava correspondents with the salutation “Śrimate Rāmānujāya Namaḥ” (“Glory (Salutations) be to the Blessed Rāmānuja!”). As a further index to the influence that the figure of Rāmānuja continues to exert on the contemporary Śrī-vaiṣṇava imagination, one need only cite some of the many cultural organizations, schools, public halls, journals and the like which flourish in his honor. In walking through the streets of only one small section of Madras’ inner city known as Triplicane, one finds evidence of the following on signboards: Rāmānuja Vedānta Centre, the Śrī Rāmānuja Vāṇi [quarterly journal], the Rāmānuja Kootam [a hostel, rented out for marriages, etc.], Rāmānuja Research Society, the Ethirāja Math, the Ethirāja Kalyana Mantapam, etc.

## 22

### Madhva

In terms appropriate to the discourse of Indian philosophy, the so-called Vedānta system—i.e., the system which purports to give the essence of the teachings of the Vedas and all that is authoritative in the Hindu tradition—is interpreted in three prevailing ways. One way is to assert that the divine reality [*brahman*] is one and the same with the spirit [*ātman*] comprehended within each individual. This mode of interpretation was the first to be articulated, and was championed, by Śaṅkara [q.v.]. It is referred to as “Advaita (“not two”) Vedānta,” a monistic approach to scriptural testimony. A second way is to affirm that the divine reality [*brahman*] is, to be sure, one and supreme, but that its unity expresses itself in three modes or qualifications, namely, the divine reality perceived as personal deity [*īśvara*], the divine reality comprehended in terms compatible with individual consciousness [*cit*], and the same reality whose



**Fig.22. Madhva**

presence is displayed in the world of inanimate objects [*acit*]. This is the gist of the interpretation of Rāmānuja [*q.v.*], whose approach is described as “Viśiṣṭādvaita (“qualified non-dualism”) Vedānta.” The third way is to stress the difference between that which pertains to the eternal order [*brahman*] and that which obtains in the temporal order [*ātman*]. These entities are “two” [*dvaita*]; they cannot be fused or confused. This is the teaching of Madhva, and is known as the “Dvaita Vedānta.”

While each of the three spokesmen for these interpretations—Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Madhva—were able and articulate at the level of philosophical discourse, all were also concerned to bring within the practical grasp of the masses the truths which they had discerned. Each of these philosophers established institutions for the promulgation of his teaching. These *maṭhas* or *pūṭhas* were, and are still being, headed by apostolic pontiffs, men whose careers exemplify in their day-to-day habits and counsels what each founding philosopher considered to be at the human core of his vision. Adherents of the Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita systems have, through the centuries, been able to look to the leaders of these institutions as paradigmatic models respectively for their own lives. When in doubt they may consult these pontiffs. Always, these leaders project an image or readiness to serve their followers by expounding their views on the good life through discourses, homilies, written maxims, and ethical treatises. Thus, the common man—and his family—is provided with nurture and guidance to live a life compatible with the philosophy of his religion.

The followers of Madhva, called “Mādhvas,” recognize 24 *maṭhas* today, most of them located in the state of Karnataka. These centers where exemplary monastics live and teach and worship are perpetually open to them. Mādhvas gravitate to those *maṭhas* which cater to the language they speak, these usually being the ones which have for generations served their ancestors as well. Accordingly, Mādhva *maṭhas* fall into three major categories: one, known as the “Gauḍa Sārasvata” community, supports two *maṭhas* which address themselves in the language of “Konkaṇī” to their clientele in southern Karnataka and in the Cochin area of the

state of Kerala; the second, known as the "Deśastha" community, supports 10 *mathas* which address themselves in the language of Kannada, Marathi and Telugu to their clienteles in the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh; the third, known as the "Śivalli" community, supports 12 *mathas* which address themselves in the language of "Tulu," mainly in the state of Karnataka. All of these three, and those who follow their teachings, have in common a reverence for the person of Madhva and his apostolic successors. As well, they all acknowledge the Dvaita perspective that man and God are two eternally distinct and different entities and that man stands in relation to God as servant to master. Also, they have in common certain cultic concerns pertaining to worship, sacraments, scriptural authority, the holy vocation and prayer.

The founder of this movement, Madhva, is also known by such names as Vāsudeva, Pūrṇaprajña and Ānandatīrtha. He was born around 1238 C.E.<sup>39</sup> of Brahmin parents in a village called Pājaka, situated near the coast in the southern part of the state now known as Karnataka. The date of his birth was on the 10th day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Āśvina* (September-October). Many are the references to his being an incarnation of the Wind-god. Madhva himself states that he was Hanumān of the Rāmāyaṇa-period and Bhīma of the Mahābhārata fame, who are known to have been the sons of Wind-god. Most of what is known of his life comes from two sources, the earliest, two generations after the master's "disappearance"; the other, at least a century after Madhva's times.<sup>40</sup>

What emerges from the fragmentary evidence is the image of a man as gifted intellectually as he was robust physically. Whatever may be missing from the fuller picture we would like to have, there is little doubt that he was a great scholar, able to approach Sanskrit texts with perspicacity and originality which few before or since his time have been able to demonstrate to such a degree. It also appears that from his early years and throughout his long and active life he maintained a vivid sense of the relationship between man and God that prompted him constantly to challenge and repudiate the Advaitins and their monistic attitudes. At times his arguments were highly charged, even to the extent of being disdainful.

In his early years he was known as Vāsudeva. His Brahmin parents entrusted his education to one Acyutapreṣka, a well-known scholar and head of a nearby religious community. In his study of Advaita texts with this master the lad had a violent exchange with Acyutaprekṣa and angrily left him. In due time, evidently, their rift was healed, for it was under this same Acyutaprekṣa that Vāsudeva, without having married first, entered the monastic order of *sannyasa* at the age of 16. At this time he assumed the new name of "Pūrṇaprajña." It seems to have been but a few short months or years that saw him elevated to the post formerly held by his teacher—he became the head of the religious community at Udipi. This new position provided him the opportunity to debate with opponents, to travel widely, and to draw himself a large following of admirers. Most importantly, it gave him time to write. Consequent to his new office he also received a new name, "Ānandatīrtha" ("he whose compositions brings bliss or joy"). The name by which he is most remembered now comes also from this period, for it is said that the saint himself invented it as a synonym for "Ānandatīrtha," namely, "Madhva" ("one whose essence is [sweet like] honey").

He was to live on many years. One of the many things memorable about him was his devotion to physical culture. He was blessed with a powerful and strong body; as a youth he was active in sports; in his more mature years he kept trim by swimming, mountain-climbing and wrestling. He himself quoted an Upaniṣadic dictum that "the cultivation of the spirit cannot be managed by the weak." At the age of 79, he was still vigorously teaching his views to students. One day, the ninth day [*navamī*] of the waxing half of the lunar month of *Māgha* (January-February), he left a group of his disciples at the Anantapadmanābha Temple in Udipi with the following words: "*Uttiṣṭhata; jāgrata; prāpya varān nibodhata*"<sup>41</sup> ("Arise! Awake! Extend yourselves always to the best in life and realize the goal beyond"). It is said, simply, that he "disappeared" never to be seen again. His disciples, then and now, affirm that he still lives in the Himalayas at some place north of Badrināth.

He left behind a legacy of almost 40 works. Among those are his scriptural expositions of the *Brahma-sūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa, the 10 principal *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.<sup>42</sup> Also he composed independent treatises like the *Daśaprakaraṇa* which, in ten sections, refutes the basis tenets of Advaita philosophy. In addition, he also produced the *Viṣṇutattvavinirṇaya*, the prime concern of which is to establish the supremacy of Viṣṇu over all other gods. Those who turn to these words in their Sanskrit originals must be impressed by the freshness and vigor of his style which is at once cryptically brief and richly allusive. Whatever may be one's philosophical commitment, it comes clear upon perusal of Madhva's works that he stands in the company of the world's ranking philosophical authors.

It remained for some of the followers of Madhva to make his position accessible to the ordinary layperson. Turning for inspiration to some of Madhva's own devotional lyrics and *stotras*, *gāthās* and *subhāṣitas*, his institutional successors like Lakṣmīnārāyaṇatīrtha (Śrīpādarāja) began a tradition of song and psalm which expressed the emotional impact of conceiving of self as "servant" [*dāsa*] to the Lord [*Harī*]. Others took up this theme, including some of Karnataka's best-known musicians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (and following). Soon a whole literature in a vernacular which everyone could understand namely, *dāsa-sāhitya*, emerged. In a way that was even more accessible to the masses than were the Tamil utterances of the Śrī-vaiṣṇava *Āḷvārs* like Nammāḷvār [*q.v.*] and of Śaiva saints like Māṇikkavācakar [*q.v.*], the tradition of the "*Haridāsas*" became widely popular with the masses. Racy, colloquial, these lilting songs are sung even today by Mādhva men, women and children.

There are not temples or shrines dedicated to Madhva. This would be against Mādhva doctrine—he was human, not divine. The difference between the two is both distinct and real. Further, he is believed not to have died, but still lives on in "Uttara-Badarī." In fact, images of Madhva will not be found. Only two-dimensional drawings may be rendered of this saint.



**Fig.23. Rāghavendra**

At the *maṭhas*, and in temples which serve Mādhva-community worshippers, his birth is not celebrated. What will be found, once each year, is a commemoration over a 9-day period of his "disappearance." This is a period called "*Madhvanavamī*," and starts on the first day of the waxing half of the month of *Māgha* (January-February), and culminates on the ninth day [*navamī*]. During this time there will be large-scale feasts offered to the faithful, and on the last day Madhva's portrait will be taken in procession. At any one of the 24 Mādhva *maṭhas* this time is celebrated with great display. The pontiffs will participate in the celebrations, and seminars and religious discourses will be scheduled in the saint's honor.

Our line drawing (Fig. 22) shows Madhva seated before an open *pustaka*-manuscript, expounding from one of the palm-leaves. This no doubt symbolizes his own exposition of the *Dvaita* position, an interpretation reinforced by the raised two fingers of his right hand ("Two, not one!").<sup>43</sup> He sits on a "plank," token of his office as *maṭha* pontiff. The single staff [*ekadaṇḍa*] by his right elbow denotes the majesty and omnipotence of Viṣṇu. He sits in a cross-legged posture, dressed in a bordered *dhotī*, a peculiarity of Mādhva tradition. A separate upper-cloth covers one shoulder and drapes over the shaved head of the Master. In keeping with his status of a *saṁnyāsin* he wears no *upavīta*-cord. We may also assume that, according to Mādhva tradition, he also retains no tuft [*śikhā*]. He wears at his neck a double strand "rosary" made of *tulasī* and/or of lotus-seeds [*kamalākṣa*].

He displays on his body several marks. The larger ones are the Mādhva sect's version of the Vaiṣṇava *punḍra*. Altogether there will be twelve of these on his upper torso and forehead, one each for the twelve *mūrti*-forms of Lord Viṣṇu, whose protection is thereby invoked. These are fashioned on the body each morning by the orthoprax Mādhva after a purificatory bath and prior to morning worship and the day's main meal. They can be made by applying with two fingers a yellowish, powdery mixture known as "*gopī-candana*," in a shape reminiscent



of the *aṅgāra*-flame. The dot between the eyebrows as well as the other dark streaks within the other flame-like *puṇḍra*-marks are made preferably with the ashes obtained from burnt cotton wicks and charcoal (remnants of worship done earlier.) The dot between the eyebrows is applied last, just before the devotee takes his meal. The smaller marks are made by applying small seals dipped in *gopi-candana*, transferring their design to the body by stamping it in place. The designs are in the forms suggestive of Viṣṇu's conch, discus, club and lotus. A grid-shaped element is denotive of the 8-syllabled *mantra* sacred to Viṣṇu's worshippers [the "*aṣṭākṣara*"-*mudrā*, based on the "*aṣṭākṣara*"-*mantra*, "Om nāmo Nārāyaṇāya"]. Once a year a Mādhva devotee renews his commitment to his faith by having warmed metallic instruments in the shape of these "seals" applied to his body as "brands." In Madhva's depiction one of these "scars" is seen on the inner part of his right forearm.

Mādhvas often name their sons after the Master. Accordingly, it is not unusual in the South to meet men with such names as Madhva Sarvajña, Ānandatīrtha, Pūrṇaprajña, Vāyujīvottama and Jīvottama. A remarkable feature about Mādhvas is their sense of community, a close cohesiveness which binds them together socially and culturally. It may also be observed that Mādhva women appear especially to be more orthoprax than other Hindu women in their observance of such things as the fortnightly "*Ekādaśī*"-fast, their cultivation of the *Tulasī*-plant [q.v.], and honoring the *nāgas* [q.v.], etc.

## 23

### Rāghavendra

Pictures of this popular seventeenth century saint feature a large, tomb-like structure in front of which he is depicted either seated or standing. The sepulcher is what identifies the figure as Rāghavendra. For, the

structure is in fact the vault where he chose to be buried. The site of the burial place is in the town of Mantrālaya, along the western border between the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, a little over 100 miles south and a bit east of the city of Hyderabad. The shrine of his *samādhi* is called *Bṛndāvana*, and has served in recent generations to increase the attraction of the town as a pilgrimage site. Yet even during the saint's lifetime votaries came there regularly to seek his personal blessings. When his body was interred there—and the traditional belief is that he was buried alive while in an elevated state of ecstasy [*samādhi*]*—*the visitations to the place proliferated. We shall return to the traditional beliefs surrounding Raghavendra's *samādhi* and burial after looking at his life.

Not all the available vernacular sources agree on the details of Rāghavendra's career. Indeed, there seem to be some important matters about which contradictory accounts are given. A few highlights may be tentatively advanced for a biography. He was born in 1601 C.E. near Tanjore. He was the third son of Brahmin parents, Timmaṇṇa Bhaṭṭa and Gopammā. His father and mother were distinguished but indigent; they had emigrated south from what is now the state of Karnataka. His birth had been preceded some years by the arrival of an older sister and brother. He, the third and last child, was given the name Venkaṭa Bhaṭṭa.

As is not unusual in hagiographic accounts, we are told that he was a precocious child, gifted in many subtle ways. Some accounts of his life even attribute several miracles to him at an early age. What seems more clear is that his earliest formal education was under the tutelage of his older sister's husband, a scholar of some regional repute, by name Lakṣmī-Narasimhācārya. After his investiture with the sacred thread (*upanayana*) in the year 1608 C.E., Venkaṭa studied poetry and drama with his brother-in-law and was introduced also to the thought of Madhva [*q.v.*]. It appears also that it was during his early life that he learned from his older brother how to play the *vīṇā*. In what was to become his virtuosity at the instrument, he carried on a family tradition.

We do not know when his parents died. It appears that Veṅkata Bhaṭṭa's marriage was arranged by his sister and brother-in-law. They selected as his wife one Sarasvatī Bāi, and the two were married in the year 1619 C.E. His brother represented his father at the wedding. Soon after, Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa and his bride went to Kumbakonam where he underwent further training in traditional teachings.

He did not stay there very long, however, as we hear of him next in Karnataka, where, at the town of Bhuvanagiri, he received students of his own, young men who sought him out due to his growing fame as a scholar. Meantime a son, Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa, was born to him and his wife and poverty remained always a problem. He moved back to Kumbakonam where he met Sudhīndratīrtha, pontiff of the Mādhva center there. These two found themselves drawn to each other. The pontiff invited the young scholar and his wife to stay at the Maṭh. The two are later known to have studied Dvaita philosophy together.

When Sudhīndratīrtha fell ill shortly thereafter, he invited Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa to consider the possibility of succeeding him. Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa declined, citing his young family dependent on him. In Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa's place, then, another was chosen as the pontiff-successor, one Yādavendrātīrtha, who almost immediately thereafter went on a walking tour through the North. During his absence Sudhīndratīrtha again fell ill. According to the accounts filtered through the followers of Rāghavendra, the sick Sudhīndratīrtha prayed to Lord Rāma to change the young scholar's (=Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa's=Rāghavendra's) mind. His prayers were answered.

Veṅkaṭa Bhaṭṭa, however, decided to proceed in his own way to honor his second invitation from his pontiff-patron. First of all he decided not to tell his wife immediately of his plans. Second, while he was still a *gṛhastha* ("householder"), he saw to his son's *upanayana*. He then went to Tanjore without his family and there took the vows of a *saṁnyāsin*, that is, a renunciate who formally leaves behind family and fortune. This condition was a prerequisite for him to accept the pontifical office offered him by Sudhīndratīrtha. As a *saṁnyāsin*

he took on the new name "Rāghavendrātīrtha." The year was 1623 C.E. According to the accounts traditionally maintained by followers of Rāghavendra, when his wife came from Kumbakonam to Tanjore to see him in his *math*, she was refused entry. Humiliated beyond endurance, she committed suicide, about which more, later.

Sudhīndratīrtha's condition worsened and he went on a last journey to Hampi. He performed an act, as others before him had done and as others after him—including, notably, Rāghavendra himself—were also to do. Going to a spot near the bank of the Tuṅgabhadra River just outside Hampi, he composed himself in yogic posture and breathed his last. In Mādhva circles this act of voluntary dying is called "entering *Bṛndāvana*."<sup>44</sup> When the news of Sudhīndratīrtha's death reached the travelling Yādavendrātīrtha, he returned to Kumbakonam expecting to assume his office as pontiff. Rāghavendra was, of course, already there functioning in that capacity.

The controversy over succession required the adjudication of the ruler of Tanjore. According to the version of the verdict circulated among Rāghavendra's followers today, the ruler's decision was based on the principle of "seniority." One would think, therefore, that the judgment would have been in Yādavendrātīrtha's favor. But Rāghavendra's followers aver that the judgment of "seniority" was in their master's favor, for, in the first place, he had been the first to be invited by Sudhīndratīrtha to succeed him in office and, in the second place, there was a much more "compelling" argument. That was to do with another, more esoteric interpretation of who was senior-most between the two contenders. According to this argument, the name "Yādavendra" pertains to the Lord Kṛṣṇa, who was King of the Yādavas during the *Dvāpara-yuga*. By the same token, the name "Rāghavendra" pertains to Rāma, prince of the Raghu-dynasty, during the preceding *Tretā-yuga*. Thus, according to them, the dispute was resolved. Further, as proof of Rāghavendra's claim to authenticity, he possessed the hallowed image of Rāma given to him personally by the late pontiff. The possession of this "*mūla-Rāma*"

image had been one of the insignia of his predecessor's office. Just as his predecessor received it from his master, so Rāghavendra possessed it to hand down to his successor as proof of apostolic succession. In fact, what we have just reviewed is the sectarian recapitulation and explanation of what has ever since remained a split between two factions of Mādhvas. To this day, there is continuing uncertainty among many as to the validity of the choice of Rāghavendra, and the authenticity of his pontifical successors.

Yādavendrātīrtha went on to become the pontiff of the Uttarādi *Maṭh*, one of the eight *maṭhs* founded by Madhva. Rāghavendra moved to the small village mentioned at the beginning of our essay, Mantrālaya, and established his headquarters there. He was to remain there some 40 years receiving all who came to him. And many did. He was a charismatic figure; moreover, it was clear to those around him that he was also a miracle-worker. The hagiographers wax eloquent in their descriptions of the saint's wonders. He gave pure speech to those who stammered. He gave a clean bill of health to lepers. He gave clarity of mind to the deranged. He gave new hope and vigor to the impotent. On one occasion he outwitted the Nabab of Adoni (the ruler of the area) when the latter sought to test the saint by sending him a polluted offering. It was during this long period of Rāghavendra's residency at Mantrālaya that he also authored 47 works.

Indeed, Rāghavendra's reputation rests as much on his literary activities as it does on his saintly vocation. His 47 works are all highly regarded as authoritative statements of the Dvaita Vedānta school of thought. Among his works are commentaries on several Upaniṣads, on the *Bhagavad Gītā* and on several Vedic passages. He was recognised as an authority on the Hindu philosophical systems of Nyāya (logic) and Mīmāṃsā (Vedic exegesis). He was also a brilliant interpreter of Madhva's works. Although he is not known to have composed any music, he was, as we have already noted, highly regarded also as a musical authority and performer.

We must now return to his wife's suicide. There is every reason

to believe that Rāghavendra and his wife had been happily married. He had at first refused the pontifical office out of regard for his wife and son. But what seemed to him a higher calling finally won his commitment. Tradition claims that Sarasvatī Bāi's suicide was not so much caused by humiliation as it was prompted by her devotion to her spouse now "dead to the world" as a *sannyāsin*. The hagiographers assert that when the ghost of his wife visited him, Rāghavendra took the first steps to assure her eternal rest by sprinkling holy water in the direction of that apparition. As a further measure, he instructed his son, and left directions for all his son's issue as well as their wives and other relatives, to perform a special ritual in his wife's honor. To this day, all those who call themselves blood relations of the saint, perform what is called "*Sumanāgalī-pūjā*" before they undertake any important ritual event.<sup>45</sup> So the memory of the suicide and the consequent welfare of her wandering spirit is kept alive and honored by Rāghavendra's descendants.

Rāghavendra's own end came in his 70th year. One day early during the month of *Śrāvaṇa* (July-August) in the year 1671 C.E., he instructed his followers to accompany him to a place on the bank of the *Tuṅgabhadra* river. It was not far from his Maṭh-building. He had previously arranged for 700 sacred "*śālagrāma*" stones [*q.v.*] to be brought to the site. As well, a mound of earth had been transported there for what he was about to do. Leading the procession of his downcast devotees, and carrying his beloved musical instrument, the *vīṇā*, he walked solemnly to the spot. There he sat down, placed his *vīṇā* beside him, composed himself in yogic meditation, and entered into *samādhi*.

His devotees knew what they were to do. They took the earth, mixed with it the 700 *śālagrāma*-stones, and fashioned around their seated master a "*Bṛndāvana*". It is believed that Rāghavendra "lives" inside this sepulcher. An eye-witness account written by one of the earliest hagiographers of the saint claims that when the tomb was finally sealed, the master's voice was heard to issue from within: "Lord Hayagrīva



will witness to my powers" ("sākṣī hayāśyo 'tra hi").

The simple mud-*Bṛndāvana* has since been covered with marble slabs and somewhat extended from its original size. The top, as always, remains open so that soil [*mṛttikā*] may be secured from the interior to render its miraculous effects. Covering the marble tomb is a larger, *maṇḍapa*-like structure, the walls of which are steel-mesh. Only a few are permitted inside this structure, one of them being one of the several full time attendants who act as priests at the site. Around this roofed structure is a much larger open court where devotees of Rāghavendra gather to circumambulate the site of his *samādhi*.

Our line drawing (Fig. 23) shows the saint standing in front of the *Bṛndāvana* which marks his final resting place. Given his pre-eminent association with this *Bṛndāvana*-tomb, in a sense, it would be enough for his followers simply to show it and nothing more. For, the sepulcher is so closely associated with Rāghavendra that to decorate it is the same as decking the saint's person. Thus in that sense his presence either standing or seated in front of the structure is redundant. The cloth draping the tomb and the double-strand of *tulasī*-beads on the *Bṛndāvana*-structure are, then, reiterated as we see an upper cloth draping his head and a double-strand of *tulasī*-beads encircling his neck. On one side of him is his *vīṇā* buried with him; on the other side are two coconuts, the normal offering which any devotee brings while visiting the tomb.

As already indicated, depictions of Rāghavendra show him either seated or standing. He is invariably dressed in the typical garb for *saṁnyāsins*, the [*kāṣāya*] cloth of ochre. As was noted in the iconography of Mādhva [q.v.], this saint's garments also show a border. The small water-jug [*kamaṇḍalu*] in his left hand and the sandals [*pādukā*] he wears both indicate his ascetic commitment. The *ūrdhvapuṇḍra* on his forehead identifies him as a devotee of Viṣṇu, its shape along with the marks on his body confirming that he worships his God according to the rules of the Mādhva community. The staff that slants along his right side is comprised of a single stick [*ekadaṇḍa*] and is symbolic of his claim to pontifical status in the Mādhva order. The *abhaya-hasta* ("Fear



not") displayed by his right hand imparts to the entire depiction a sense felt by all who ever visited his shrine, namely, that in his presence they need never fear about what is to become of them here or in the life hereafter.

The site of his *samādhi* is the center of the personality cult that flourishes in his name. If anything can be said about the cult, it is that it is growing. Daily hundreds of believers go to Mantrālaya to circumambulate his "presence" in the *Bṛndāvana*. Soil from it is packaged and sold, and is ingested both for its ascribed curative effects and for the sense of communion with the saint afforded thereby to the devotee. A cupful of the soil from his *Bṛndāvana* at Mantrālaya is taken whenever a new center of this saint's worship is opened. There have in recent times been "Rāghavendra Maṭhs" established in such places as Bangalore, Hyderabad, Madras, Mysore, Nanjangud, Tirupati, Trichy and Udipi in the south, and such places as Bombay and Poona farther north. In each of these Maṭhs the soil from the Mantrālaya sepulcher is used to initiate a replica of the original. Soil from those dispersed *Bṛndāvanas* are also believed to have extraordinary powers. Daily scores of people will be seen repairing to these regional shrines in order to commune with the saint who still "lives" and affects their lives.

There is one day each week which seems to attract more devotees to Rāghavendra's shrines than any other day, Thursday. Once each year, in the month of *Śrāvaṇa* (July-August) followers of Rāghavendra commemorate his *samādhi*. This 7-day "*Ārādhana*," as it is called, features processions of the saint's picture or image in the streets near the center where he is worshipped. That center, quite obviously, is something more in the cult than a mere Maṭh; it functions, in fact, as a temple and is sometimes referred to as such, other times referred to in terms of its central symbol as a "*Bṛndāvana*." The saint's likeness which is carried through the streets during the annual festival commemoration is conveyed on a different *vāhana*-vehicle on different days of the 7-day period—on one shaped like a horse one day, on

one resembling a chariot another day, and so on. This 7-day period is also a time when the soil in the *Bṛndāvana* at Mantrālaya and at the replica *Bṛndāvanas* elsewhere—sometimes considerably depleted by its circulation to the faithful—is replenished in an act which is presumably one of the central mysteries of the cult.

If one has any doubts as to the hold this saint has on contemporary Indians one need only visit one of the cult centers during the 7-day “*Ārādhana*”-period. Particularly at Mantrālaya, but also at the regional centers, one will find huge throngs teeming in circumambulation of the *Bṛndāvana*. Those devotees are drawn to the saint because they feel he can work wonders in their lives. And, according to testimony one hears, Rāghavendrasvāmī has made the lame to walk and blind to see, the deaf to hear and the barren to deliver. His votaries are not drawn merely from among the Mādhvas. Circling the *Bṛndāvana*, the center of their world of faith, will be found Hindus of both low and high castes, the rich and the poor, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Muslims and even now and again, a Christian.

### NOTES TO SECTION THREE

1. Occasionally one encounters examples of Rāma at rest, in a reclining position [*śayana-rāma*], as popularly pointed out at Darbhāśayana (Tamil: Tiruppullāṇi) near Rāmeśvaram—but such are unusual depictions.
2. In temples where the image of Rāma is revealed flanked by companions, sometimes Sītā's image is found on Rāma's right, *e.g.*, at the Pārthasārathy Temple in Triplicane, and at the Kodaṇḍarāma Temple in Madhurantakam, *et al*; and sometimes her image is found on Rāma's left, *e.g.*, at the Rāma Temple in Bhadrāchalam, etc.
3. Leaders of a political movement in Tamil Nadu introduced some years back a “*Rāvaṇatīkṛtā*,” a pageant which features Rāvaṇa as victor in the legendary battle with Rāma.
4. Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* (“*Yuddha-kāṇḍa*” 61:63) specifies that Hanumān uses both [dual number] his hands to carry the medicinal mountain. Thus, the addition of a *gadā*-club is a gratuitous detail, and must be accommodated graphically either by tucking it under one of his arms or else, by freeing one of his hands from the mountain to grasp the weapon, in defiance of the text.
5. The eight *siddhi*-powers are usually listed as follows: *aṇimā* (the ability to shrink to minute, atomic size); *mahimā* (the ability to swell to gigantic proportions); *garimā* (the ability to make himself dense and heavy); *laghimā* (the ability to become light

and bouyant); *prāpti* (the ability to get hold of anything he wants); *prākāmya* (the ability to assume any identity he desires to take); *iśitva* (the ability to inflict his will upon others); and *vaśitva* (the ability to accept the deference of others).

6. This story is alluded to under the notes accompanying the depiction of Kṛṣṇa with his consorts, Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā. It should also be noted that some understand "Dīpāvalī" primarily as a festival of a new year, a time when they invoke the goddess Lakṣmī's presence and blessings.
7. Statements like this are always subject to dispute. There is no doubt that Kṛṣṇa is one of the most-widely popular gods in India. We are not unaware, as we say this, however, of our own statement about the widespread worship of the *devī*-goddesses, that a deity like Māriyamman [q.v.] brings us face-to-face with one of Hinduism's most widely worshipped and ancient divinities.
8. Inscriptional evidence indicates the temple was originally dedicated to Venkatakṛṣṇa Bhagavān, a form of the Lord associated with his abode in the hills. Today this temple in Triplicane is commonly used as a stop-over point for pilgrims visiting Tirupati for purposes of worshipping Venkateśvara [q.v.].
9. Faith ascribes the "scars" to the battle "He" fought; metallurgists would be more likely to explain the pitting of the icon to the effects of the many substances to which it has been subjected over the centuries while "bathing" it liturgically. At the same time, it is tempting to allow the evidence of those "scars" to confirm the earlier testimony which connects this temple and its image with Venkateśvara and his cult (see note 8, above, and the legend recounted in Essay 18, *infra*, in regard to the "scar" on Venkateśvara's face).
10. In this connection attention is drawn to a manual known as the *Tantrasārasaṃgraha*. Its injunctions for daily worship seem to direct the routines at Guruvāyūr, just as it seems to be used by the followers of Madhva [q.v.] in the rites conducted in the temples and *mathas* supported by that community.
11. At Śrīraṅgam this garland of fresh flowers perpetually placed upon the deity is called "Vaijayantī" ("the garland of victory"). Its constant replacement is in accordance with the dictum of Hindu folklore that the way one can recognize a god is that the garland he wears never withers.
12. This is not a universally utilized iconographic detail. The fact is that orthodox Hindu men often receive at the time of their marriage, and thereafter wear, a second *upavita*-cord. In the Śrīraṅgam sanctuary, one of the two "cords" is a gold band placed decoratively across the body of the image.
13. The *utsava-bera* depiction of the deity of any given temple need not necessarily replicate the exact form of the deity in the *sanctum sanctorum* of that temple. Indeed, often they are different; most especially are they different if the immovable icon [*mūla-bera*] is revealed in a lying or dancing form inappropriate for displaying in procession.
14. According to *Mahābhārata* VI: 604, the *Harivaṃśa* and various *purāṇas* the terrestrial plane is said to be comprised of seven concentric islands. [*dvīpa*]: Jambu, Plakṣa,

Śālmala, Kuśa, Krauñca, Śāka and Puṣkara. Each of these is in turn surrounded and separated by a concentric sea: salt water, sugarcane juice, wine, ghee, curds, milk, fresh water.

15. Some 80 miles to the southwest of Śrīraṅgam.
16. In all the great "Brahmotsava" processions of Śrīraṅgam there is another figure taken out in ambulation with Raṅganātha and his consort, Raṅganāyaki, namely Vibhīṣaṇa. This figure is one famous in Hindu mythology as the hero whom Rāma [q.v.] placed on the throne of Laṅkā after vanquishing the demoniac Rāvaṇa. As a coronation presentation, Rāma gave to Vibhīṣaṇa the ancient deity of his Ikṣvāku-clan, the Lord Raṅganātha. But rather than go all the way to Laṅkā, which popular tradition associates with Śrī Laṅkā (Ceylon), the deity stopped at Śrīraṅgam where, in his reclining posture, he turned on his right side in order to face south where Vibhīṣaṇa was ruler. The south-facing aspect of this deity, then, is explained mythologically in terms of the "great tradition" epic-tale of Rāma's conquest of the southern dynasty of Śiva-worshippers descended from Pulastya. This by no means excludes explanations in other terms for this unusual orientation to the south of the Brahmanical deity, Viṣṇu.
17. In fact, the *Pārameśvara-saṁhitā* is a text of the Pāñcarātra corpus of canonical texts which reputedly reflects the mode of worship honored at Śrīraṅgam.
18. This dictum was hinted by Rāmānuja [q.v.] in his 'Śrīraṅga-gadya,' one of the three prose-compositions of his *Gadyatraya*. As we have already noted, this text is chanted before the Lord during the month of *Caitra* (March-April).
19. The reader is reminded of the arduous journey still required of pilgrims who wish to go to Śābari Hill to "see" Lord Ayyappaṇ [q.v.] in Kerala.
20. *Bilva*-leaves, usually found only in Śaiva liturgies, are used; Saturday, especially sacred to Somāskanda, is a special day; some snake-ornaments [*nāga-ābharaṇa*], rarely seen on Viṣṇu icons but frequently featured in Śaiva images, are prominently and repeatedly seen as the Lord's adornment; in the 1000 names of the Lord chanted, there is the puzzling presence of the name Kārttikeya, scarcely an epithet normally accorded Viṣṇu but a common alias for Subrahmaṇya; a hill shrine such as this one is more often than not an abode of Śiva and his entourage, especially of his illustrious son, than it is of Vaiṣṇava manifestations; and so forth. See also n. 9, above.
21. A similar ambiguity is affected on images of Nammālvār [q.v.], inasmuch as he is worshipped alike by Teṅkalais and Vāṭakalais, hence cannot be claimed exclusively by either sector of devotees.
22. Some of these *suprabhātam*-songs have been adapted by one of South India's leading female vocalists, Mme. M.S. Subbalakshmi, and are available on LP records and audiotapes.
23. Professor Fred Clothey of the University of Pittsburgh (U.S.A.) has made two documentary films in the hills outside of Pittsburg, both reflecting worship at this important site of Hindu piety in North America—one, a record of the temple's opening day rites in the late 1970s, "Consecration of a Hindu Temple"; the other, interviews with devotees who came there in the late 1980s to worship Lord Venkatesvara, "Pilgrimage to Pittsburgh." Both the approximately 30 minutes long; each is available for rental or for purchase.

24. These are cult-names identifying respectively worshippers of Viṣṇu, Śiva, the Goddess, Sūrya (the Sun), and Gaṇapati.
25. In the South, at least, it is not uncommon for Subrahmaṇya or Kumāra (sometimes also hailed as Murugaṇ [q.v.]) to be substituted for Sūrya; other Smārtas simply add Subrahmaṇya (Kumāra-Murugaṇ) as a sixth deity worthy of worship in addition to the traditional five identities.
26. A *sphaṭika*, for example, is rare and costly. Not every family can afford to own one. In its place may be substituted a picture of Sūrya or, as already noted, the popular deity Subrahmaṇya (Kumāra-Murugaṇ).
27. A Tamil Smārta informant gives this account of worship in his home. Special attention to the various deities worshipped is given according to the schedule: Sunday = Sūrya/ Monday = Śiva/ Tuesday = Subrahmaṇya (Kumāra, Murugaṇ)/ Wednesday = Gaṇapati/ Thursday = Viṣṇu/ Friday = The Goddess/ Saturday = his personal *iṣṭadevatā*, or "chosen deity," which happens to be Veṅkaṭeśvara [q.v.]. The addition of the seventh, a family deity, rounds out the week. All seven are honored daily, with the greatest devotion always going to Veṅkaṭeśvara; but the daily round bows to necessity for emphases. This same informant—by no means unusual in what he does—mixes pictures and icons with the few "found" objects within the reach of his financially depressed family.
28. Such correspondences of sworls and indentations will be found cataloged in *Agni-purāṇa* I: xlvi, *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* "Prakṛiti Khanda" XXI, *Garuḍa-purāṇa* I:45:14-31 and I:66:1-5, *Padma-purāṇa* V:120:51b-80 *passim*—and elsewhere.
29. The term in Tamil refers to one who has dived deep into the plentitude of God's mystery.
30. Now known on maps as "Ālvārtirunagari," the re-naming done centuries ago in Nammālvār's honor.
31. This is a collection of about 4,000 hymns in Tamil attributed to the Ālvārs. Nammālvār's own compositions comprise a major section of this. For further details of how the *goṣṭhi*-groups manage in the ten days to sing all the 4000 hymns—as they do at this time for Nammālvār—see our essay on Rāmānuja [q.v.].
32. One of these instruments is found illustrated in the line-drawing of Rāmānuja [q.v.].
33. He has several other names and epithets by which he is likewise commonly known. One, Emberumānār, is the name conferred upon him by his teacher. Others derive from his role as an ascetic [*yati*]—Yatirāja, and its Tamilized equivalent Ethirāja, as well Yatindra. Still others derive from the folk belief ascribed to his figure that he was an incarnation of Viṣṇu's eternal serpent survivor, as was also the ascription given to the legendary hero Rāma's younger brother—hence, Śeṣa and Lakṣmaṇa as well as Lakṣmaṇamuni, Īaiyaperumāḷ (a Tamil epithet for Lakṣmaṇa as well as Rāmānuja) and Īaiyālvār. Another title by which he is known is Uḍaiyavar, also Bhāṣyakāra.
34. This town was to gain infamous notoriety when, on May 21, 1991, the former Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and 18 others were slain by an assassin's bomb during a visit



there.

35. It is the normal practice for the corpses of saints and *saṁnyāsins* to be buried in a seated yogic posture, rather than to be cremated.
36. It may come as a surprise to many Western readers who have seen Hindu images only in museums or sales-rooms settings that they are never found "uncovered" in temples or home shrines. Any image used in worship will be found "dressed." Indeed, one of the *leit-motifs* of *pūjā* is the offering of clean clothes to the icon, after bathing and before feeding him/her, and the daily changing of that apparel.
37. Sometimes, less convincingly, they are said to symbolize the three *guṇas* which constitute the material world in which we are all in this life so inextricably involved. Still again, the three are said to refer to the controls of thought, word and deed saints perfect. A sectarian interpretation is that the three bound as one becomes a Banner of Victory (of Viśiṣṭādvaita) over rival (Dvaita and Advaita) schools. The Śaivas and Smārtas who adhere to the Advaita teaching that Brahman is the sole reality—a teaching promulgated and popularized by Śaṅkara [q.v.]—have no such problems with ambiguity; to them the single [*eka*] *daṇḍa* is said invariably to symbolize the insight, "Truth is one." The Dvaita followers of Madhva [q.v.], when depicting his banner, also show but one [*eka*] stick [*daṇḍa*] to emphasize the majesty and omnipotence of Viṣṇu.
38. Although not visible here, there is no doubt that Rāmānuja, as other Vaiṣṇava *saṁnyāsins*, retained a "tuft" [*śikhā*]. As with the preservation of the *upavīta*-cord, this in some way symbolizes a notion of remaining in the world while yet having renounced it. By contrast, Smārta and Śaiva *saṁnyāsins*, upon entering the fourth stage of life, discard the *upavīta*-cord and shave the *śikhā*-tuft.
39. There is no unanimity in regard to his birth year. Some place it earlier, even in the late twelfth century. His death date is also unknown. Whatever be the correct years of the lifespan of this figure so closely associated with Udipi, he is to be clearly distinguished from another figure who died about a century later in the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara; his name, confusing the unwary, was Mādhvācārya.
40. The *Madhva Vijaya* is a hagiographical account by one Nārāyaṇapaṇḍitācārya (late fourteenth century), and attributes to Madhva a number of miracles, asserting also that he was an incarnation of Vāyu, the wind god, just as had been Hanumān and Bhīma in earlier times. The other main source is the fifteenth or sixteenth century figure, Jayatīrtha, whose commentaries on Madhva's dense statements afford us with the earliest, presumably also the most authentic, interpretations of the master's compact and enigmatic language.
41. These words come from the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, said to be Madhva's favorite. Another saint of a later age, who was also committed to a life of both physical and spiritual cultivation, Vivekananda (d. 1902), also found this passage inspirational, and used it with his disciples.
42. These works are collectively known in Hindu traditions as the "*prasthāna traya*," and in Hindu philosophical circles it is necessary to demonstrate that one's position in no way contradicts the teachings embodied in those three holy texts. In this, Madhva

was only following conventional expectations. Before him, such figures as Śaṅkara [q.v.] and Rāmānuja [q.v.] had found it necessary to do the same. In more modern times, even such figures as the late S. Radhakrishnan bowed to this convention by producing translations and glosses upon these three basic texts, the "*prasthāna traya*."

43. Another way to construe the two fingers is to suggest that they indicate that of all the gods Viṣṇu is supreme [*hari sarvottama*], and of all individual selves [*jīva*] Vāyu, the wind-god whom Madhva himself claimed to be, is the best [*vāyujīvottama*].
44. Elsewhere in the Hindu tradition this act of sloughing off the body is known as "*jīva-samādhi*," "*sajīva-samādhi*," "*svacchanda-maraṇa*," etc. See essay elsewhere in this volume on Rāmaliṅga. The word "*Bṛndāvana*" in this connection means primarily a sepulcher or burial vault. The name has overtones with the structure used for growing the sacred *tulast*-plant, and is shaped somewhat like it; the burial vault, also, contains soil (see essay elsewhere in this volume on "*Tulasi*" and its worship). In the latter case, the soil is used to bury the body of the 'deceased'. In both cases, the soil is believed to be sacred and to have marvelous, curative powers. Many of the pontiffs of the Mādhva centers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries chose to "enter into *Bṛndāvanas*" as a way of finalizing their careers. These are cultic centers of great importance to Mādhvas. The practice of "entering into *Bṛndāvana*" has now fallen into disuse.
45. The term "*Sumaṅgalī*" refers to a lady who possesses the five auspicious tokens [*maṅgala*] namely, the "*maṅgala-sūtra*" (wedding thread at the throat), bangles at the wrists, toe-rings, nose-stud and *tilaka*-mark on the forehead. Such a lady is, of course, one who is married, for only married ladies are allowed to wear all these five items. In *Sumaṅgalī-pūjā* as practised in Rāghavendra's clan, the procedure is to invite five mature married ladies and to honor them by the gifts of a new *sārī*. Inasmuch as there is normally a special meal prepared in connection with the important ritual which "*Sumaṅgalī-pūjā*" must precede, these five married ladies are served first. Among Rāghavendra's descendants, it is believed that one who honors "*Sumaṅgalīs*" in this manner honors Rāghavendra's wife.



**SECTION FOUR**  
**Selected Goddesses**

## Devī : Durgā

Throughout the South in villages, towns and cities there are temples large and small dedicated to the goddess Durgā (Tamil : Turkkai). The more impressive temples to Durgā at Kaḍil and at Mangalore in the state of Karnataka, at Mānāmadi in the state of Tamil Nadu, and at Vijaywada in the state of Andhra Pradesh are not typical. Most Durgā temples are small. They are usually cell-like structures to which is attached a covered portico, the whole set on a small plot of ground surrounded by a wall. Everything is whitewashed, and the most visible marks to indicate that the place is dedicated to the worship of Durgā are the lion-*vāhanas* made of stone or plaster atop the four corners of the walls, and a crude plaster or stone replica of the goddess' shrine presence somewhere near the gateway to the compound.

The goddess is sometimes related to Śiva as his wife, or *śakti*, in one of her more ferocious aspects. This identity with Śiva at times appears to be very tenuous, more than occasionally non-existent. For, this goddess also seems to enjoy an independent status—she remains, as she seems originally to have been, a *grāma-devatā* ("village deity" or guardian of the fields) of a threatening visage. Her true identity is, indeed, part of her mystery and fascination. Is she the wife of Śiva, or not? Is she a virgin, or not? Is she benign, or is she savage? Her very name means "difficult of access, impassable, unattainable," and while this originally referred to her mountain origins, it surely also refers in some way to her enduringly elusive nature. While abodes housing her presence are ever always near her worshippers, she remains difficult to grasp fully, somehow just beyond the reach of reason.

It may be her very ambiguity which draws her minions to her. Whatever else she may be, it is clear that she is first and foremost a personification of power. As such, she is approached for a share



**Fig. 24. Devi : Durgā**

of the abundant might which it is the hope of her supplicants she will bestow. Accordingly, many go to her to acquire "strength" in order to endure the vicissitudes of daily life, or "power" to apply directly in situations threatening status or survival. Like most mother goddess figures, Durgā is approached also for progeny, for the cure of diseases, for protection against poisonous bites, and for prosperity. In addition, it is not uncommon for votaries of this goddess to pray to her to dispatch and destroy enemies seen and unseen.

In temples dedicated to her worship, *pūjā* is done twice daily. On Sundays and Tuesdays—times which appear to attract more crowds to her presence than other times—she is worshipped a third time. That third service coincides with the inauspicious period on those days known as "*Rāhu-kāla*" (on Sunday it falls between 4:30 - 6:00 p.m., and on Tuesdays it occurs between 3:00 - 4:30 p.m.), and recalls that she is the presiding deity over the planet Rāhu, at his most ominous then.<sup>1</sup> Certain days of the month, too, are especially important times for her worship—on the ninth day [*navamī*] of each fortnight, as well as on both the days preceding and the day of the New Moon [*amāvasyā* and its preceding *caturdaśī*-day] and of the Full Moon [*purnamī* and its preceding *caturdaśī*-day]. At such times, in addition to the usual offerings of cooked and uncooked foods, flowers, *etc.*, she is garlanded with a necklace of limes. It is said that those represent the skulls which, in life, she wore as decoration.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes she is also presented with a trayful of limes cut in half and reddened with vermilion powder. They are advanced, we are informed, as substitutes for the blood-offerings which were earlier part of her worship and which are today still not unknown features in her worship at some temples.

In addition to the annual *Śivarātri* vigil enjoyed by all *devīs* in the month of *Māgha* (January-February), the most elaborate of the annual festivals addressed to Durgā in her temples occur in the fall and in the spring. Their timing suggests they may be vestiges of

harvest and planting rites. At both, however, it is rather Durgā's identity as a destroyer that is stressed.<sup>3</sup> The one in the fall coincides with the all-India festival, *Navarātri*, which is explained elsewhere in this volume in relation to the Śiva-līṅga [q.v.] and to the goddess Sarasvatī [q.v.]. Among Durgā devotees the fall festival is referred to as "*Śārada Navarātri*" ("Nine Nights in Autumn" or "Nine Days-and-Nights in Autumn"). It is a time when for nine consecutive days in Āśvina-month, in a way somewhat different from the way she is remembered within more Sanskritized circles, her devotees recall her victories over the demons she was created to quell. The springtime festival, which may be a peculiarity to south Indian *devī* worship, is called "*Vasanta Navarātri*." It is celebrated in the month of *Caitra* (March-April) when, just as in the fall, the image of the goddess is taken in procession in the temple precincts for nine days, and once again her conquests are celebrated.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Durgā's *raison d'être* is destruction. One story of her "birth" is that she was created at a colloquy of the gods, issuing from the mouths of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and other gods. The golden creature who materialized full-grown was immediately armed with their weapons, one for each of her arms—the trident of Śiva, the discus of Viṣṇu, the club of Yama, and so on up to as many gods as were present. Thereupon she was sent out against the buffalo-demon, Mahiṣāsurā, whom she dispatched forthwith. On another occasion this fierce female humbled Bhāṇḍāsura, another demon. Later she took on and vanquished Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, destroying them both. Yet again she challenged Śumbha and Niśumbha, crushing them forever. So it was time and again that with her power and might she laid low the adversaries of the gods. While we do not know exactly what those demons represent, either in sum or individually, it is clear that Durgā had as her destiny their decisive destruction.

Our line drawing (Fig. 24) depicts Durgā in one of her benign attitudes. It is the custom, in south India at least, not to worship

a deity in its ferocious form. Here, she appears approachable. She is seated not on her lion-*vāhana* [*siṃha*] but on a pedestal such as might be found in a shrine. Just as often, however, she might be shown standing in front of her animal mount. She is dressed in a matronly *sārī*, usually yellow. It is the rare depiction, in our experience, which does not show her with toe-rings, *maṅgala-sūtra* at her neck, and a *tilaka*-mark on her forehead—all symbols of a married lady.<sup>5</sup> The lotus in her lower right hand is a well-known fertility symbol, and is typical of *devī*-figures generally, but here may additionally be construed as a benign counterbalance in some degree to the sword, club, and trident she carries in her other three hands. Its significance as a symbol of fertility requires no further comment. When Durgā is revealed with more than four arms, her weapons corresponding more closely than here with the great gods of her myth of origin, she is called "*Mahiṣāsūramardini*" ("Destroyer of the Demon Mahiṣa"); in that identity she is also shown with the severed head of a buffalo at her feet.

It is possible here, as we have attempted to do elsewhere in this volume, to undertake an esoteric reading of the signs of the figure before us. The two symbols, the sword and the club may be construed as instruments of death (especially given the reference to Yama by the club); at the same time the ever-erect *triśūla* of Śiva and the lotus may be construed as indicators of new life. The double message simply reiterates ambiguity of her basic identity already alluded to. But we cannot pursue the mystic levels of interpretation further in an essay which is designed mainly to identify Durgā as but one of the manifestations of the generic *śakti*-power of the Divine, more often than not associated with Śiva.

While small replicas of Durgā in plaster, extruded plastics and *papier-mâché* are occasionally found in some homes, the worship of Durgā at domestic shrines is not common in the South. What does permeate her presence abroad from the temples and shrines which normally



**Fig. 25. Devi : Kālī**



house her is her name. It is not unusual to meet girls and women who are her namesakes. Variant names for ladies include: Jayadurgā ("the Victorious Durgā"), Kanakadurgā (the "Golden Durgā"), and Vijayadurgā (the "Triumphant Durgā"). Men's name include Caṇḍidāsa and Durgādāsa, both of which connote their devotion to the goddess.

## 25

### Devī : Kālī

That a deity so popular in the North, especially in Bengal, should in the South be relegated to relative obscurity, merely attests to the vagaries of parochialism in the Hindu tradition. For whatever may be the reasons explaining Kālī's visibility in the land surrounding Calcutta [*Kālī-ghāṭ*], for reasons perhaps equally complex she is not nearly so prominent in the South. There are, to be sure, temples dedicated to this dark lady throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent's peninsular tip, but they are neither numerous nor highly influential. Yet, Kālī's presence adds a dimension to south Indian cultic life which deserves notice here.

Like Durgā [q.v.], there is an ambiguity which surrounds Kālī's identity. It is not clear whether she is merely a grim local personification of the Mother goddess, or whether she is perceived primarily as the cruel consort of Śiva. In fact, she is both. Though of uncomely countenance it is well-known that she is kind and that all she does pertains to the divine plan. Votaries go to her temple for relief from chronic diseases as well as from the parching threat of cholera, for progeny as well as prosperity. At the same time—often by the same individuals—she is hailed as *śakti* of Śiva, the destroyer. Further mystery attaches to her person (as with Durgā) in regard to her marital status. It is never clear whether Kālī is virgin, or wife. Depictions of her usually show her with toe-rings, *maṅgala-sūtra* and *tilakā*-mark—all of which point to her status as Śiva's spouse. Yet she is often pictured alone and of tender countenance, just as she is also meditated

upon and celebrated in story as standing upon the "corpse" [*śava*] of Śiva. Her swarthy figure remains shrouded in mystery.

Kālī has no parents. She appeared by parthenogenesis: when Durgā fought the demons Caṇḍa and Muṇḍa, there flashed from her frown the full figure of Kālī. She was, according to purāṇic accounts of the event, dark, fanged and four-armed. Her most awesome conquest was over the powerful demon Raktavīra. This *asura* had, through penance, won the boon that, even though he might be slain, each drop of his blood to fall upon the ground would immediately rise again, issuing forth a thousand clones of himself. To prevent this, Kālī killed him and in doing so, held him aloft so that his bleeding body was above her gaping mouth. She drank his life-fluid as it oozed from him during his final paroxysms. Having acquired from him a taste for blood, Kālī has roamed forever thereafter in her vampire search for sustenance. She is known to haunt cremation grounds in her ghoulish quest for fresh blood. Consequently some depictions show her with famished body, lolling tongue.

Our line drawing (Fig. 25) reveals her in a benign attitude appropriate for worship. She is seated on a pedestal in the relaxed "*ardhaparyāṅka*"-posture; her usual "*vāhana*," the corpse, is missing. She is dressed here quite regally. The attributes of her marital status are quite obvious. Although the fangs, fire (of destruction? of genesis?) and fingernails are also prominent, attention must be drawn to her lower right hand, held in the reassuring *abhaya-hasta* ("Fear not!"). Her two upper arms hold the *vajra* and *nāga* respectively. Those may be construed in a number of instructive ways, only one or two of which we may suggest here. For example, the *vajra* is primarily a weapon. As such it kills. It also delivers. Its shape is reminiscent, further, of Śiva's *triśūla*, although it appears to be only in a vestigial form. Similarly, the *nāga* may be deadly. As a symbol of time [*kāla*] and its transitions, of rebirth and the hold that it has on humans, it is not surprising that its shape here resembles a noose. Yet time and

its transitions, including rebirth, present new possibilities and suggest new life. By holding these symbols in her hands, Kālī demonstrates her control over their powers. The lower left hand extends the *kapāla*-bowl, symbolic both of the story in which she caught the blood [*rakta*] of the demon and of the sacrifice she demands from her votaries. Given her benign attitude here, the question must arise as to what it is—exactly—she expects of her devotees.

At temples in the state of Tamil Nadu—such as those at Ambattur, Māvūr, and Muthialpet (in Madras City)—Kālī is worshipped twice a day.<sup>6</sup> The ministrations are in charge of men called “*Mātangas*,” professional (though not necessarily full-time) priests in her service. In addition to the morning and evening offices there are on Sundays and Tuesdays special offerings in which, at some places, animal sacrifices are made. This practice in the South, however, has become increasingly rare in the last fifty years or so, pumpkins and large gourds nowadays providing substitutes for animals. Each month on the New Moon Day [*amāvāsyā*] ladies are drawn to the temple where, after having fasted during the preceding day [*caturdaśī vrata*], they approach the goddess to petition long life, health and progeny for themselves and/or for their relatives.

At most Kālī temples the annual *Śivarātri* vigil is celebrated in the month of *Māgha* (January-February), and this follows a pattern not unlike that observed in Śaiva temples throughout the South. But what distinguishes Kālī temples in the South from other, local *devī*-shrines is the festival held each year on the second Tuesday of *Vaiśākha*-month (April-May). As part of that, the goddess is carried in procession, and throngs gather to “see” her in her glory on that day. The *Navarātri* cycle later on during the month *Āśvina* (September-October) also affords an opportunity—by some deft reinterpretations of its “meaning” by Kālī-worshippers—to celebrate the goddess; a description of the cycle need not detain us here inasmuch as it has been dealt with elsewhere in this volume in connection with Durgā



**Fig. 26. Devi : Kāmākṣī**

[q.v.]. In the same month, as it declines into *Kārttika*-month—usually about mid-October—the dark goddess is glorified by the lighting of lamps as part of the traditional “*Dipāvalī*” Festival of Lights celebrated throughout the South.

Unlike practices in the North by devotees of *Kālī*, images of her are not often kept by south Indians in their homes. It is enough to seek her out as occasions demand in her temple dwellings. However, her name is honored perpetually among those who call their children after this grim but gracious goddess. She is remembered, then, whenever such female names are mentioned as: *Bhadrā*, *Bhadrakālī*, *Kālī*, *Kālīkai*, *Mahākālī*, *Mātangi*, and *Śyāmalā*. Men also are given such names as *Kāleśvara*, *Kālimuttu*, and *Śyāmalarao*.

## 26

### **Devī : Kāmākṣī**

The genius of Śaivism for assimilation has been commented upon elsewhere in our essay on *Somāskanda* [q.v.]. Its ability to incorporate into its own cult powerful folk-motifs is illustrated once again in the phenomenon of the goddess *Kāmākṣī*. Here, we have evidence of a dark, aboriginal goddess, strongly associated with a particular place made the bride of Śiva. Underneath the many-layered veneer of brāhamanical traditions long associated with her, there seems to remain only partially concealed the image of a very young girl so powerful by virtue of her austerities that anyone who sees her enjoys boundless rewards. In the process of her absorption into Śaivism she was invested with siren-like qualities and given attributes normally associated with the God of Love [*Kāmadeva*]. In her identity as “*Kāmākṣī*” she is considered to be as one who has “eyes [*akṣa*] of “love” [*kāma*] at one level, and, at another level, as one whose glance bestows all wishes. Her virginal youth (age 8) has been transmuted to the figure of a young woman married though yet of unblemished purity. Her swarthy hue has been transformed into a glowing golden hue. (For all this, the parallels to

the paradigmatic figure of Pārvatī [q.v.] are instructive.) She functions not only as at the śakti of Śiva but also as an incarnation of the ever-gracious Mother Goddess.

Our line-drawing (Fig. 26) shows her as she is depicted at hundreds of temples and shrines in Tamil Nadu.<sup>8</sup> She is invariably shown as youthful, amiable, and gently smiling. Normally she is shown with four arms, and seated. Her *padmāsana*-posture—a pose somewhat unusual for goddesses—is reminiscent of her earlier career as a penitential.<sup>9</sup> This pose may, indeed, substitute for a *vāhana* in her case, as portrayals of her with an animal are virtually unknown. The presence of a parrot in some portrayals of her is construed by us not so much as an indicator of a *vāhana* as a link to her identity with Manmatha (i.e., Kāmadeva, the Hindu god of love). This identity is constantly alluded to by the iconography featured in her two extended hands. Her lower right hand holds a bunch of five flowers; her lower left hand holds a sugarcane. Whatever other connotations these two symbols of florescence and fruitfulness may also have, they are primarily to be construed as, on the one hand, the five arrows of Kāma's quiver, and on the other hand, the sugarcane bow of that god of love.<sup>10</sup> In her two other hands she has the *aṅkuśa*-goad and the *pāśa*-noose, symbols already familiar to us from other figures in Hindu iconography and likewise, here, suggesting her quickening and saving capabilities. Images of gracious deities usually demonstrate either the *abhaya* or *varada-hastas*, or both; their absence in the depictions of Kāmākṣī is explained by her devotees as apparent only. For, in her large and lovely eyes, they say, are found all the gracious blessings implied by those two, more overt, hand-gestures. Here, as always, she wears the *maṅgala-sūtra* and *tilaka* of a married woman. The crown, rich ornamentation and apparel indicate her elevated status as *devī*.

Kāmākṣī is synonymous with Kāñcīpuram. Also known simply as “Kāñcī” or by the Anglicized “Conjeevaram,” that town has long

been renowned as one of the seven "holy cities" of India. It is very ancient. As early as the fourth century C.E. it was already known as the capital of the Pallavas.<sup>11</sup> Kāmākṣī's temple there has attracted devotees for over a millenium. The unparalleled and paramount position enjoyed by this ancient goddess at Kāñcīpuram is illustrated by two facts. One is that it is the feminine presence within the precincts of "her" temple which predominates: even the form which her consort takes on her right in the *sanctum sanctorum* is half-female, "Ardhanārīśvara." One has to go to the third *prākāra*-courtyard of her temple to find a *linga* of her consort—and that was installed only in recent times.<sup>12</sup> The other, is that among the hundreds of temples in Kāñcīpuram—noted as a town of temples—the Kāmākṣī Temple takes precedence of place. In their grand festival parades, the deities of other temples normally make a circuit around the four streets surrounding her temple. Further, it is asserted that the main *gopuram*-entrances of all the other temples in the town, whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, face the Kāmākṣī Temple. Given these considerations the process of absorption by Śaivism of indigenous cults into its fold, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is all the more notable. One is left to ponder whether it is Śiva who mastered the local *devī*, or she who conquered him.

The priests who attend her at her temple are Śaiva Brahmins. She is normally worshipped four times a day except on Tuesdays and Fridays, when additional liturgies are introduced. Each month on the Full-Moon Day [*purnamī*] there are elaborate rites added to the daily rituals, and addressed not only to her but also to other divine beings in the precincts of her massive abode [*ālaya/koyil*].

Annual festivals are celebrated at the Kāmākṣī Temple in a grand manner. During the month of *Māgha* (January-February) is the all-night vigil of *Śivarātri*, followed soon thereafter by a 10-day festival which culminates in the asterism of *Māgha*. In the month of *Phālguna* (February-March) an even more festive 10-





**Fig. 27. Devi : Lakṣmī (Gajalakṣmī.)**

day celebration, called “Kalyāṇotsava,” commemorates her wedding to Śiva. This attracts as many as a hundred thousand devotees to her temple. The 9-day cycle of *Navarātri* is celebrated twice, once as “Vasanta-Navarātri” in *Caitra*-month (March-April), and later as “Śārada-Navarātri” in *Āśvina* month (October-November), a feature explained in general terms elsewhere in this volume (*vide* “Devī: Durgā”).

Pictures of this lovely-looking lady abound in homes in and around Kāñcīpuram. Her benign gaze extends beyond there, however. Just as pictures of her comely countenance are disseminated throughout Tamil Nadu and beyond, so one finds numerous, local Kāmākṣī temples,<sup>13</sup> which model themselves on the Kāñcīpuram original, distributed throughout the South. Her presence as a *kula-devatā* in domestic worship is likewise not limited to the town of her origin, but is spread over the southern regions of the sub-continent.

Two vows pertaining to the worship of Kāmākṣī deserve notice in closing. For those who harbor a particular desire which has yet to be fulfilled, there is the practice of approaching the goddess at weekly intervals over a five-week period. This may be done either at Kāñcīpuram itself or at one of her regional shrines, but wherever it is done it must be preceded by appropriate measures such as fasting and prayer. The recurrence in this of the number five in relation to intentionality cannot help but remind one of the five flowers held in Kāmākṣī’s hand (arrows-*pañcabāṇa*, and the *mantra* of the same name which won for the goddess her coveted lord). The second observance is called after her epithet “Kātyāyanī,”<sup>14</sup> and is a *vrata*-vow undertaken exclusively by females and has as its purpose for unmarried girls the acquisition of a desirable husband, and for married ladies the protection and longevity of their spouses and loved ones. This commitment to honor and emulate the goddess commences in the month of *Phālguna* (February-March) seven days before the culmination of the goddess’ *kalyāṇa*-wedding festival.

## 27

**Lakṣmī (Gajalakṣmī)**

Lakṣmī is a well-known, easily-recognized, and often-encountered female figure famed throughout India. Depictions of her full-blown, are found, in the medieval period but it is quite clear that her even more ancient origins—both iconographic and in terms of the cultic attributes associated with her—go back to the nymph-like figures called *yakṣīs* that predated, but were centrally incorporated into, early Buddhist art. Her many names attest to her continuing popularity through the succeeding ages and, as well, give us our first inklings of how she is understood even today among Hindus.

Lakṣmī is the feminine form of the word "*lakṣma*," which means "spot" or "mark." Because she is associated in popular piety as the consort [*śakti*] of the god Viṣṇu, her presence, if not shown overtly visible standing at his right side, is signified by the "*śrīvatsa*"-spot, or follicle "mark," that is, the mole above his right nipple where a discerning devotee may always "see" her eternally with her lord. An alternative designation for her is "Mahālakṣmī," "She who is great [*mahā*-]" as well as "She whose mark [*-lakṣma*] characterizes (the Lord)." Another popular name for Lakṣmī is "Śrī," which means "The Beauteous One," "The Prosperous One," "The Honored One," "She (to whom others resort)," and "She (who resorts to the Lord)." Lakṣmī is also known as "Padmā," "She who is identified with the Lotus"; as "Kamalā," "She the lotus [born] one"; "Indirā," "The one who is exceedingly prosperous"; "Haripriyā," "The beloved of the lord Hari"; and "Hemamālīnī," "She who wears garlands of gold." Lakṣmī has many other names marking her intimate association with Viṣṇu, so that as his name varies, hers, too, may consequently change.

According to the traditions which converge to illuminate this lovely lady's natality, when the *deva*-gods and the *rākṣasa*-demons

were in cosmic contest their tug-of-war, which served to churn the Milky Ocean, materialized from the depths not the desired drops of divine nectar but—wondrous to behold—the white waters washed up a woman! This luminous lady rose, lifted on a lotus that bore her aloft, to hover above the whirling currents and tides of discord, engendering by her radiant presence a calm and peace that thereafter prevailed. All turmoil ceased as the whole of creation beheld her beauty in wonder and astonishment, and she smiled down from her throne-like lotus seat called "*padmāsana*." Emerging with her were two elephants, ensign representatives of the four cardinal directions who, elevating their trunks, offered her an auspicious *abhiṣeka*-sprinkling of sparkling waters from the celestial Ganges.

Thus, our line-drawing (Fig. 27) follows tradition and shows her lotus-borne. As in the epic and purāṇic accounts, and as is appropriate to any divine being of infinite power and eternal presence, hers was no normal "birth," since she has no beginning, no end—she arose from the waters fully formed. She is usually depicted, as here, as a young woman who has just attained maturity, neither an under-developed maiden nor an extravagantly endowed matron. She is in her precious first prime, and is said to be of a glistening gold color; and everything about her—the garments she wears, the flowers she holds, the ornaments which grace her, even the fragrant pedestal upon which she sits—is fresh and bright and pure.

The waters, of course, represent her source in the unfathomable depths of nature that brims with divinity and with the super-abundance of all things. The elephants who attend her are themselves, according to Hindu sentiments, symbols of affluence and prosperity; thus they reiterate Lakṣmī's own identity. Further, these same elephants suggest her sway over the whole of creation, north, east, south and west, for these stand for the beasts of burden who, according to Indian mythology, bear up the world at its four corners. The whole, then, is a picture of promise. Even leaving the lovely lady aside for the

moment, we learn from Indian lore that even to dream of an elephant portends success, wealth and good fortune!

But it is she, after all, who is central in this picture. And, a Hindu looking at this depiction—which is correctly to be called “Gajalakṣmī,” that is, “Lakṣmī-with-Elephants”—sees here the very image of plenty, the embodiment of all that is good and bountiful in life. It is worth noting that, as here so in all depictions of her, Lakṣmī wears the *maṅgala-sūtra* at the neck and rings on her toes, tokens that she is a married lady; these signs are understood by her votaries to indicate that she has been since the beginning spouse to her lord Viṣṇu, hence is to be acknowledged as ever-associated with him, indeed, as inseparable from His Infinite Being. This dimension of her personality suggests that she is the Eternal Feminine, and represents the profound fecundity in all creation and creativity. She is the *śakti*-power of all that which may be brought into being, of all that which is yet to be realized. As such, she is approached by the hopeful for abundant blessing of all that is best in life. Specifically, she is known to many as the Goddess of Plenty, the Dispenser of Health and Wealth, the shining Dispeller of Ignorance. No wonder, then, her lower right hand mutely gestures “Fear not” [*abhaya-hasta*] and her lower left hand signals “Let me give unto thee” [*varada-hasta*]. Indeed, it need not surprise us then that as one who so abounds in grace, she is conceived by many to be the benign mediatrix between man and god; hence she is resorted to by them first before they would dare deliver themselves directly to a more demanding divine redeemer.

Before moving on, it may be instructive at this point to notice once again her seated posture. Bear in mind that the very same position in which many practice yogic concentration as well as perform their *pūjā*-routines of worship—even the position in which they take food—is a recollection of the posture of this paradigm of plentitude. Just as she is lifted on the lotus and brings with her presence all

auspicious things, so the person who sits likewise may also hope to tap the mysterious cosmic, psychic, divine and/or physical powers which lie submerged, as yet unrealized, unseen and/or only dormant in order that those very powers may be plumbed, acquired, honored, nourished. "*Padmāsana*," the posture of which we speak, means, literally, "lotus-sitting attitude," and it resonates with all the profound implications which are conjured up by Lakṣmī's own appearance at the earliest stages of the world's evolution.

There are temples throughout India dedicated to this goddess of prosperity. Most famous, probably, is the Mahālakṣmī Temple at Kolhāpur, in western India's Maharashtra State, where tradition says she withdrew from Venkaṭeśvara [q.v.] in order to maintain her own majestic honor. That is a pan-Indian center of pilgrimage and an important site in its own right. But, in regard to Lakṣmī's worship in south India, what is most striking is that this goddess, in addition to such spots as may be solely associated with her, finds a place in every Vaiṣṇava temple, no matter how large, no matter how small. Normally, in such places, she is assigned a separate shrine located just to the south of the Lord's *sanctum sanctorum*—in a position corresponding to his coveted right side. Just as does the Lord in the main sanctuary face the rising sun in the east, so does this deity who derives from the depths of creation look to the dawn of each new day. And to this shrine every visitor to the Lord Viṣṇu's temple resorts first, only thereafter to approach the Lord in his own inner place of worship. Indeed, in the South, those who call themselves "Śrī-vaiṣṇavas" do so to indicate the favored place which Lakṣmī, or Śrī, occupies in their spiritual life, their liturgical practices, and in their theology.

Further, once one enters into the innermost sanctum of a Vaiṣṇava temple in the South, whether she is shown standing there beside the Lord as an icon with but two arms, modestly representing his constant consort, or whether she is standing there alone, nonetheless

she is ever concretely visible. Her palpable presence is perceived in the Lord's "*Śrīvatsa*"-spot already alluded to, located on his chest—normally on his right pectoral, the side of utmost honor. In any case, *Lakṣmī*, or *Śrī*, is the "mark," or the "honored one," who is inseparable from her lord; and, she is the very one whom all might themselves wish to emulate in view of her constancy and uninterrupted proximity to/union with God.

On the domestic scene, *Lakṣmī*'s image is never very far from sight. In some of the older houses in traditional quarters her likeness is carved in elaborate lintels over doorway entrances in token of the hoped-for blessings that may flow from her benign presence. Her depiction in a calendar picture or in a framed picture is often hung to adorn the walls of *pūjā*-rooms as well as of living rooms, kitchens and entrance halls. As often as not the portrait will reveal her, as in our illustration, as "*Gajalakṣmī*"; but just as often she might be shown in her guise as "*Dhānalakṣmī*," in which she is shown dispensing gold coins from outstretched hands; or as "*Dhānyalakṣmī*," in which she holds corn or rice in token of her domain over crops and fertility; or as "*Santānalakṣmī*," in which she confers the boon of offspring; or even as "*Vīralakṣmī*," in which she imparts valor and bravery. Other forms in which the goddess is worshipped, in addition to the five, already mentioned are: "*Dhairyalakṣmī*," "the One who confers Courage"; "*Rājyalakṣmī*," "She who blesses Rulers (with secular power)"; "*Varalakṣmī*," "the Lady who bestows Bountiful Boons." Occasionally one finds shrines to "*Aṣṭalakṣmī*," in which all eight aspects of the goddess are to be found.

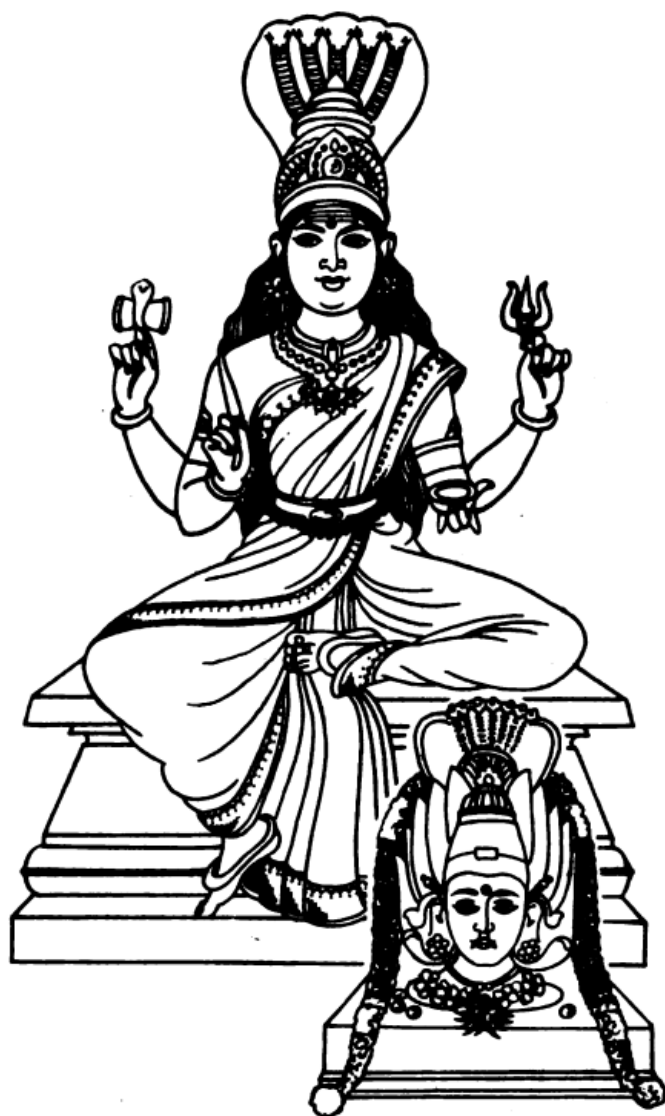
Practices that pertain to her association with wealth are worth recounting at this point. As goddess of plenty she is also dispenser of money. Her picture is often noticed pasted inside the lid of a cash box; or, her image may be found hanging above a cash register in places of business; or, a passport-size photo or picture bearing her likeness will be in many billfolds. Within the money-lending communities she is, by some, seen to be present in, therefore worshipped as, a gold-



bar—no less a fitting aniconic form than the paper money in which many others acknowledge her blessed presence! In fact, on whatever may be their payday, many of the partisans of this patroness of wealth repair to her shrine, paycheck in hand, and personally thank her for her largesse.

Beyond these miscellaneous activities there are certain times particularly associated with her worship. Dawn and twilight, when there is a mystic union between day and night and the two are ever so subtly joined, is a moment when Lakṣmī (the Golden Goddess)—the one eternally in union with God (the Dark-hued Pervader of all things)—is recalled. At eventide, when in olden days lamps were lit, it is still the practice to open wide the front door of a home and to put on the front porch light in hopes that Lakṣmī will be led there, indeed, that she will enter and stay to bless the house by her visit. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays are held important to those who honor her; those are days when her “108” names are chanted, a devotional act which is preceded by a “full head bath” (or, in an act its exact equivalent, by a shower) in the pre-hours of the morning. Of those days, Friday is especially auspicious for worship of this goddess; on that day special foods may be prepared for offering to her, and for shared enjoyment by family members. And on the last Friday of the “bright” fortnight of the Tamil solar month of Āṣī (July-August, or the *amānta* month of Śrāvaṇa) many girls of Smārta and Mādhva Brahmin families who are approaching their post-pubescent maturity, put on new clothes and undertake a program of fasting and prayers—called “*Varalakṣmīvrata*”—the motive being to please the lady of largesse in whose power it is to bestow upon them the riches and blessings of a happy married life.

For reasons which are not entirely clear, but just as in the case of Sarasvatī [q.v.], so also Lakṣmī tends to preserve the integrity of her own independent identity in south Indian Hinduism. While as the consort of Viṣṇu she may be given different names to correspond with his particular aspect (e.g., Sitā as Rāma’s consort, Radhā as



**Fig. 28. Devi : Māriyamman**

Krishna's beloved, *etc.*), she is in this regard not unlike the *devī*-goddesses associated with Śiva as that deity's *śakti*. As an independent deity, however, Lakṣmī seems to have escaped the more or less interchangeable identities attributed to Durgā, Kālī, and with other *devī*-goddesses treated elsewhere in this volume—and this, even among Śaivas who may themselves occasionally honor her as Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity.

One more important constellation of association orbits around Lakṣmī's likeness and must be mentioned here. This comes to her by virtue of her identity in popular piety with the annual holiday, Dīpāvalī (known in the North as Dīwālī). Dīpāvalī is a celebration which, among other things, precedes the ushering in for some people of the New Year. Here, in addition to whatever else may be done to honor her alone, Lakṣmī is joined with Sarasvatī [*q.v.*] and Gaṇeśa [*q.v.*] in a triumvirate. Each one of the three, recall, has to do with beginnings and blessings. At that critical time of juncture, when the old year joins the beginning of the new year, it is only appropriate that this triad of functionally-related deities—bestowers of earthly bounty, of intellectual treasures, and of unimpeded progress—be worshipped as a triune source of well-being.

We have placed this essay on Lakṣmī in the section dealing with the goddesses. It would have been equally defensible to place her treatment in the section dealing with Viṣṇu and his associated forms. We concede her precise identity must remain controversial. In regard to popularity and prominence, however, there can be no doubt.

## 28

### Devī: Māriyamman

"*Ammā*" (Telugu, Kannada), and "*Ammāi*" (Malayalam), and "*Ammāṇ*" (Tamil) are suffixes which mean "Mother". When used alone as a

name, it is usually construed to refer to the great Mother Goddess known throughout the countryside as the curer of fevers and plague, of chicken pox, measles and smallpox.<sup>15</sup> It is not unlikely that this matronly figure (Fig. 28) prayed to for her "cooling glance" is the same figure—likewise associated with the serpent world—addressed in the North as Śītalā, the "Cool One." Her most common name in Tamil Nadu is Māriyamman, a name more or less interchangeable with Pachaiamman and Muthiālamman as well as with Periyānāyaki and Bhavāni—and probably many others. In Andhra country her most common name is Ammavāru, which is more or less interchangeable with Muthyālammā, Nūkālammā, Polerammā, Somālammā and Mahāmārī—and probably many others. A majority of the prefixes to the names just cataloged have to do with smallpox. So the identity of the deity appears by that to be fixed. Despite the fact that, according to the World Health Organization, smallpox has been officially "eradicated," nonetheless millions continue to throng to the temples and shrines of this goddess for other physical benefits and, of course, for spiritual renewal. There is no evidence to indicate that resort to this "smallpox deity" is on the decline; in fact, evidence is quite to the contrary. In Tamil Nadu alone, places where Māriyamman is worshipped are so numerous as to defy count. It may be that with this goddess we stand face-to-face with one of the most popular—and ancient—divinities in all of Hinduism.

One of the most arresting modes of her iconic representation is that she is shown very often with only a head and no body (some renditions depict a head only, some a head and shoulders, and some a head and shoulders and breasts). Many in the South identify this head with Reṇukā, the mother of Paraśurāma, who, when her head was severed by her son, became a goddess.<sup>16</sup> While this story associates Māriyamman and her cult with Paraśurāma, a figure with close affinities to the South (the ancient name for Kerala is "Paraśurāma-kṣetra," indicating it is his territory), it fails to account for the present-day association of Māriyamman to Śaivism. For, Paraśurāma is generally conceded to be an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. The fact is, Māriyamman is

far and wide simultaneously believed to be an aspect of Pārvatī, Śiva's *śakti*, and, at the same time, a mothering, nurturing goddess of independent status. So, then, we really do not know "who" Māriyamman is. We know only her function, now obsolete, if it be solely the cure of smallpox—and that despite this she remains tremendously attractive to the legions of her devotees.

What takes votaries to Māriyamman's temples today? Clearly, many of the same functions that always drew them there. They go to her because they believe she alleviates sufferings of all kinds. She grants boons. She blesses with children. She insures a job. She arranges a promotion. She finds a husband. She supervises an easy birth. She helps the lame to walk. She causes the mute to speak. She enables the blind to see. She calms the deranged. And, as always, she cools fevers.

Among the thousands of shrines and temples to this great Mother Goddess there are a few which may be named as influential centers of Māriyamman's worship. In Tamil Nadu there are the Māriyamman Koil at Samayapuram, the Bhavānī Koil at Periyapālayam, the Karumāriyamman Koil at Tiruverkāḍu,<sup>17</sup> and the Kottaimāri temple in Salem; and in the state of Andhra Pradesh there are the Somālamma Kovil at Rajahmundry, and the Mutyālamma temple at Vijayawada. At such places, as well as at the thousands of other Māriyamman shrines and temples, she is served by two or more full-time priests. Usually these are hereditary positions passed down from father to son, the men drawn from lower-caste ranks; occasionally, as already noted, Brahmins move into these positions as well, and it is not unheard of for women to carry on sacerdotal duties.

The single most important day for the worship of this great Mother Goddess is Sunday. Of all the days of the year, the Sundays in the month of *Āṣāḍha* (June-July) are the most auspicious for her worship—especially the last Sunday of that lunar month. Throughout the South this will be a day of huge gatherings at the temples of the great goddess. While many of her temples celebrate annual 2,

3, 7, 9 and 10-day festivals at various times of the year (as determined by local custom), this one Sunday is universally observed as "Her" day. It is normatively preceded by a period among her devotees marked by fasting and other penances. It culminates for some, as that summer Sunday nears, with a heightened sense of reality which, in not a few cases, expresses itself in trance-like states and in ecstatic possession. Thus, one hears regularly of fire-walking as fulfillment of a vow to the goddess, and the practice of "hook-swinging" (called *ceṭil* in Tamil, *sīdi* in Telugu) is also reported. In this latter, a devotee in trance is lifted off the ground by means of hooks piercing his flesh. It is also at such times of joyous transport that those in the common crowd are inspired by the stories of the goddess and her heroic devotees, recited by groups who narrate "*Terukkūttu*" tales. The air will also be filled with the strains of song as traditional minstrels also glorify the goddess.<sup>18</sup>

In contradistinction to what is found in many temples of other cults, there are no bi-weekly or monthly days of worship scheduled for the goddess. Everything is much more free-wheeling than that. The regular daily rituals are punctuated by special, enhanced liturgies whenever a worshipper so arranges, for whatever motives, with the officiating priests. This client-oriented attitude may be one of the many factors which helps to account for the continuing popularity of this goddess. It is believed that *vibhūti*-ashes received as *prasāda* in her temples have great curative powers.

Our line drawing (Fig. 28) shows the goddess in a typically benign form with four arms. Sometimes she is shown with only two arms, at other times with as many as eight arms. She is seated in a relaxed posture [*ardhaparyāṅkāṣana*], much as she might be found in many of her local shrines. Whether she is shown this way or merely by the presence of a bodiless head (or both, as is often the case), what immediately identifies her visually to her worshippers is the five-hooded snake projection over her crown. This goddess'

connection with the serpent world has already been mentioned, but it must be pointed out here that local tradition associated with many of her shrines proclaims them to be a sanctuary not only for the goddess but also for snakes. Such snakes, sometimes reputed to be of great age, are treated as mascots of Māriyamman.

The objects which she holds in her hands may be construed to suggest her identity with Śiva and/or his *śakti* (e.g., the drum, the trident, etc.), or they may be understood as implements of her own saving work. In some images, she displays the *abhaya-hasta* ("Fear not!" gesture), but here she has her hands full. The dagger [*churikā*] has many connotations, positive and negative. It may ward off enemies; it may be used to excise pain. The drum is a common instrument used in shamanic exorcisms—it is believed to kill germs and to drive off evil spirits. The three-pronged symbol hoisted in the other hand may be construed, of course, to identify her with Śiva. But "*triśūla*" may be understood also to refer to three kinds of pain ["*tri*" + "*śūla*"] humans suffer, those originating in one's own body, those which Fate decrees, and those inflicted upon one by others. The *kapāla*-cup is held out as an offering to her votaries in the same way that the healing *vibhūti*-ashes are daily distributed to her devotees by her priests.

The origin of the disembodied head has already been noticed. Here at her feet it may be taken simply as a reiteration of her presence. This head encircled by a halo, and capped by the serpent diadem, is used as talisman of her presence—in devotional pictures of "Māriyamman," as a pendant made of gold carried about the neck, even as a decal placed on the dashboard or window of a car.

The "head" of Māriyamman, and her gracious presence which is thereby implied, is sometimes found in homes, too. On such occasions as when sickness threatens to be serious, a circle of turmeric paste is smeared by hand on an interior wall by a relative of the afflicted person(s). Vermillion is smudged in four places to indicate the eyes,





**Fig. 29. Devī : Mīnākṣī**

*tilaka*-mark and nose of the Mother Goddess. Cooked and uncooked food-offerings are made before this emblem while invoking her protection. Sometimes the cylindrical roller of the household grinding stone is taken, washed, smeared with turmeric paste, daubed with four big vermillion dots, set up, and similarly worshipped. By and large, however, there is no household cult attached to the worship of Māriyamman.

In closing, we must note this goddess' close affiliation with the "Neem"-tree (Sanskrit: *Nimba*; Tamil: *Vembu*; Telugu: *Vepa*; Botanical: *Azadirachta indica* A. Juss.; sometimes also known as the "Margosa Tree"). Its medicinal properties are utilized throughout India by all sectors. Priests of the Māriyamman cult, in addition, use sprigs or sprays of the "Neem"-tree as a wand during their ministrations to the afflicted. Standing near the door of the shrine to which the victim has been summoned, they wave these in a fanning motion to the accompaniment of appropriate chants. Invariably a "Neem"-tree will be found growing in the temple precincts some place, often in a prominent place.<sup>19</sup> Sprigs or sprays of it may also be used to represent aniconically the Goddess herself. Her "presence" is carried aloft in processions, atop the head of a devotee, the sprigs having been placed in an earthen pot into which the great Mother Goddess has been invoked. Fresh "Neem"-leaves are also sewn together to form a garment used ritually by devotees (male and female) who have undertaken a special vow to approach the goddess in purity. So attired, they circle her shrine, some on foot, some of the more extremely committed rolling themselves bodily about the *sanctum sanctorum*. This ancient Mother Goddess' arboreal associations merely serve to enhance our understanding of her pervasive influence in popular Hindu piety.

## 29

### Devī: Mīnākṣī

Madurai is a town situated deep within the interior of the southern

tip of India. It is the site of one of Tamil Nadu's most celebrated temples. The chief deity there is *Mīnākṣī*, the "Fish-Eyed" consort of *Śiva*. According to the popular accounts of her origins, she sprang from a sacrificial fire with the unusual deformity of three breasts. Sages prophesied that her shape would become normal when she laid eyes upon the one who would be her husband. Before she reached maturity, her father, the king of the region, died. She assumed ruling responsibilities. Among other things, this required the virgin to lead her nation's armies in grand campaigns against all adversaries. She had vanquished the regents of the East, Southeast, South, Southwest, West, Northwest and North; on one of her marches toward Northeast, the area where *Śiva* was ruler, she encountered him in the field. Even before battle could be waged, her third breast disappeared. *Śiva*, for his part, was smitten by the youthful queen. Without resort to arms, then, it was readily agreed that he should shift (from Chidambaram?) to her capital. They were immediately married. He thereupon assumed the name of *Sundarēśvara*, in reference to the elegant and handsome figure of himself he presented to her, and he took up residence in an abode next to hers in their joint kingdom at Madurai.

The traditional accounts of their union identify *Mīnākṣī* as well as her subsequent rule with *Śiva* with progenitors of the ancient Pāṇḍyan rulers of South India.<sup>20</sup> It is not clear to what extent the legend reflects historical events, but the fact remains that depictions of *Mīnākṣī* invariably show her with two arms, rather than with four or more, an iconographical detail which might be taken to imply a human model. And, according to local traditions, it is the cult of the goddess which takes historical precedence here, even though there is some evidence to suggest that the shrine to *Sundarēśvara* may be older than the present structure housing *Mīnākṣī*. But to her many votaries *Mīnākṣī* is the chief deity at the *Mīnākṣī-Sundarēśvara* Temple complex—*Sundarēśvara* is *her* consort, not the other way around.

Whatever be the case, Madurai is now a temple town which perpetually

celebrates the presence of the pair. Every month of the year is marked by a festival. Although the present calendar of annual *utsavas* dates back only to the seventeenth century, some of the celebrations must reflect quite ancient local traditions. A simple rehearsal of the schedule will serve to demonstrate that Madurai is unlike any other *devī*-temple in the South. Since the Tamil solar calendar commences the year in the month of *Cittirai* (April-May, i.e., *Vaiśākha* in the *amānta* reckoning system), we shall start with that month here. For, in that Tamil first month is celebrated the paradigmatic festival for Madurai, that is, the 12-day cavalcade of spectacles featuring on the tenth day the marriage of *Mīnākṣī* to *Sundareśvara* (*Śiva*) and culminating on the Full Moon day. Year after year the population of Tamil Nadu's second largest city swells to overflowing as throngs crowd into the area to see the action. Recently more than two million visitors massed for "the" *Cittirai* festival—and not just *Śaivas* but large numbers as well of *Vaiṣṇavas* and others. One reason for the size and the diversity of the multitude that gathers each year in Madurai at this time is that the 12-day marriage festival of the goddess overlaps (quite coincidentally, according to many but, according to many others, is integrally connected with) a 9-day procession of *Aḷakar* (*Viṣṇu*) from a nearby village into the environs of the city and back again. In any case, the pageantry attendant to the two, overlapping clusters of rituals witnessed then and there turns out to be one of the great displays of devotional life in south India. The next three months of the Tamil calendar, *Vaikāci* (May-June, or by *amānta* reckoning *Jyeṣṭha*), *Āṇi* (June-July, or by *amānta* reckoning *Āṣāḍha*) and *Āṭi* (July-August, or by *amānta* reckoning *Śrāvaṇa*) call for a 10-day festival in each. But, while these festivals are colorful and complex, they are no match for the earlier sacred marriage. In the fifth month of the Tamil year, *Āvaṇi* (August-September, or by *amānta* reckoning *Bhādrapada*) once again huge crowds are attracted to Madurai to witness the 18-day commemoration of *Śiva*'s coronation as the ruling monarch of the place. The next four months of the Tamil year—*Puraṭṭāci* (September-October, or by *amānta* reckoning

*Āśvina*), *Aippaci* (October-November, or by *amānta* reckoning *Kārttika*), *Karttikai* (November-December, or by *amānta* reckoning *Mārgaśīrṣa*) and *Mārkaḷi* (December-January, or by *amānta* reckoning *Pauṣa*)—are marked by festivals of 10, 6, 10, and 9 days respectively. The tenth Tamil month, *Tai* (January-February, or by *amānta* reckoning *Māgha*), features a 12-day festival schedule culminating with a boat ride for the deities in the temple tank. The Tamil year comes to a liturgical close in *Māci* (February-March, or by *amānta* reckoning *Phālguna*) as a 40-day festival unfolds, followed immediately in *Parikuṇi* (March-April, or by *amānta* reckoning *Caitra*) by a 9-day series of processions of the deities under umbrellas.

It should be emphasized that the impressive schedule of festivals is in addition to the regular routines of the temple. Daily, during festival periods and other times, there are four discrete offices which honor the goddess and her consort. Moreover, on Tuesdays and Fridays of each week throughout the year, the daily rituals are elaborated by still other liturgies involving ablutions and special adornments of the goddess' image. What is more, the Full-Moon Day of each month [*purnimā*] requires special rites in her honor to be performed.

All this demands a large staff of full and part-time priests, perhaps as many as 30 or so. Usually these men are Śaiva Brahmins trained locally and deriving from families hereditarily attached to the temple. These priests and their kinfolks normally live in the vicinity of the temple on some of the streets named after the Tamil months of the year. For, it is a peculiarity in Madurai—a town so extraordinary for its perennial flow of festivals—that the streets which bear the names of the months are the very streets closest to the temple itself. These streets are the ones through which the festive processions, as well as the personnel closely connected with them, move.

Our line drawing (Fig. 29) presents *Mīnākṣī* standing straight on a pedestal on which is imprinted a *yantra*, a design symbolic of her power.<sup>21</sup> Although she is always shown with but two arms, she

is not always shown exactly as here. Sometimes, as in the image of her in the *sanctum sanctorum* of her temple, she is shown in a *tribhāṅga*-pose, her hip gently extended to the left, her right knee slightly bent forward. The pedestal upon which she stands may reveal a lotiform motif, although it does not here. She is richly appalled and elegantly jewelled, including the presence of a nose-ornament [*nāsābharaṇa*]. Her toe-rings, *maṅgala-sūtra* at the throat, and *tilaka*-mark on her forehead are unquestionable indicators of her married status. In her right hand she holds a flower still in bud. It is surmounted by a parrot. Her left arm hangs down loosely in the *lolahasta*-disposition, typical of two-armed *devī*-forms such as Pārvatī [q.v.]. Images of this goddess often draw the viewers' attention to the eyes, as they are often large. As her name suggests—*mīna*-, "fish" + *-akṣa*, "eye"—the "Fish-Eyed Goddess," her eyes are sometimes stylized in the shape of two fishes. Her color is green.

The symbolism of Mīnākṣī's form need not detain us long. The main intention seems to suggest fertility. The flower she holds is variously identified as a blue lotus [*nīlotpala*] or a golden lotus [*tāmara*], a pomegranate blossom [*dāḍimapuṣpa*] or a *kadamba* flower—all symbols in any case of fecundity and fruitfulness although each, to be sure, suggesting a slightly different valence. The parrot, too, alludes at one level to Kāmadeva, the Hindu god of love whose *vāhana*-companion is a parrot. At another level it reminds all that the lovely goddess, so abundant in her care for all creatures, kept a parrot as a pet.<sup>22</sup> Other levels of reference sounded by the parrot by her side have to do with speech and messages—for examples, how sweet become even seemingly harsh words uttered in her presence, and how tender is the one who hears the complaints raised by her dearly beloved. As for her eyes, one recalls that the emblem of a fish appears on the banner of Kāmadeva, so that once again the presence and powers of the god of love are invoked; further, the fish was an emblem also for the Chola dynasty, so that the goddess may be construed as some



**Fig. 30. Sarasvati**



kind of mediating agent for a kingdom destined, as it were, to "have eyes only for" the Lord Śiva who descended from the Northeast to that region. The two eyes, moreover, are said to supplement the goddess' single pair of arms by providing gracious signs which, in a four-armed deity, would otherwise be demonstrated with the *abhaya* and *varada hastas*. In addition to their allusion to the banner of Kāmadeva, her "fish eyes" are more literally interpreted as the eyes of a female fish reputed, in popular lore, as an aquatic animal who protects her offspring with unblinking eyes. And, of course, gods and goddesses are in any case like fish—they never blink their eyes, which is to say, they never lose sight of those who come into their line of vision. In yet another reference to eyes recollected here, it must be recalled that throughout the long history of Indian literature to call a woman fish-eyed is the same as to call her beautiful. Green, finally, is clearly the color suggesting fertility and abundance, reiterated in both the goddess' and the parrot's body color, reinforced by the fulness and ripeness of her feminine figure.

Mīnākṣī is worshipped at domestic shrines in many Madurai homes as well as elsewhere in the South. She is honored both in metallic likenesses and in tinted portraits printed of her—almost always without her consort Sundarēśvara. Small medallions bearing her impression are worn as necklaces and rings, or as decorations on *maṅgala-sūtra(s)* by married women, or tied to the *yajñopavīta*-cord by men. The Madurai cult is further commemorated in the names given to girls—Mīnākṣī, Mīnā, and Mīnalocanī. Male names include Madurai, Mīnākṣīsundara, Pāṇḍyan, Somasundara, Sundaramūrti, Sundarapāṇḍyan and Sundarēśvara.

### 30

## Sarasvatī

The name of this goddess, "Sarasvatī," gives a clue to her archetypal

nature. As "the flowing one" she literally personifies an ancient riverine conception of reality which sees all nature in flux, and hails as essential that which is normally perceived as most ephemeral and fleeting. All things fluid are celebrated in her name. And that name first became associated with a river, the legendary Sarasvatī. In due time the name came to be applied to the goddess, by then associated with speech (no doubt in reference to the flowing nature of words), and with other phenomena featuring fluidity like music, rhythm, chants, and *mantra*(s). Eventually, the name was extended in meaning to call to mind the image not only the nature of those things fluent which originate in her but also the final consequence when all coursing energies collect in her; hence her name also calls to mind pools, lakes, reservoirs. Thus Sarasvatī was later to be equated with a luminous *pool* of wisdom, a veritable *lake* of letters welling with words and writing, a *reservoir* of accomplishments in words, speech, song and all expressions comprising the fine arts. So it is that today the Hindu deity Sarasvatī is hailed as "Goddess of Wisdom," "Patron of Science," "Inventor of Letters," "Mother of the Vedas," "Mistress of Music," "Inspirer of Poetry," and "Advocate of the Arts."

Her depiction is calculated to remind the discerning viewer of all those connotations. Her countenance is described as glistening, like a spray of surf in sunlight. Her dazzling white dress cascades down where she sits on her rock-like seat, as a mountain stream gushes over gully and into ravine. Her jewelry sparkles, as drops of dew; she is bedecked with lustrous, deep-water pearls. Not surprisingly, her peacock companion is of the color of the rainbow. Although our line-drawing [Fig. 30] shows her seated, in other representations she may be shown standing, perhaps on a full-blown lotus for a pedestal, sometimes with a swan rather than a peacock as her *vāhana*. Her primal, watery associations are always, somehow, hinted.

Usually she is shown with four arms. Most often she is shown with a *vīṇā*, symbol of her beneficence toward music and the arts.

Her toe-rings, the ring on her right hands, as well as the suggestion at her neck of a *maṅgala-sūtra*, denote her marital status—she is the wife of Brahmā, creator god.<sup>23</sup> As for the *vīṇā*, already alluded to, above, the fact that it is not propped idly by her side, but is instead held and played, while at the same time it is shown to tip diagonally across her lap, is not without significance. For, the ultimate principle of sound [*śabda*] which she personifies, is not projected unless words are articulated, is not resonated unless *mantra*(s) are intoned, is not reverberated unless rhythm is sounded, is not apprehended unless music is performed. The wonder is the ambidextrous grace which makes her hymn audible throughout the spheres! And, it is by her inclination, as it were, that she brings all the manifestations of *śabda* from the plane of the ethereal to the realm of human sense-perception.

In her other two hands she holds a rosary and a *pustaka*-manuscript. The latter is extended in her left hand toward her devotees. Her grasp of the manuscript signifies her mastery of the Vedic scriptures, her possession of the wisdom they contain. This goddess, also addressed as “Vedamātā” (“Mother of the Vedas”), indicates that spiritual understanding comes through study of such authoritative teachings, and that she as Goddess of Learning is ready to assist all in their quest for enlightenment if they but approach her with due respect and awe. In her right hand she holds an *akṣamālā*-rosary. This device contains 51 beads corresponding to the total number of vowel and consonant sounds in the Sanskrit alphabet [“a” to *kṣa*]. The beads are used to assist meditation upon certain target *mantras* which are, of course, comprised of various combinations of sounds and letters—and of all *mantras*, Sarasvatī is the Source. The rosary beads also symbolize the disciplined, dedicated and devout attitude of prayer and petition. When the *akṣamālā*-rosary is viewed, then, in juxtaposition to the *pustaka*-manuscript, what we have is a statement in visual terms that truth, final beatitude and bliss are not achieved solely through acquired knowledge and book-learning. Rather, the goddess iconographically

demonstrates that the goal of spiritual realisation is reached by achieving a balance between, on the one hand, study, perseverance, ratiocination and, on the other hand, prayer, petition and piety. The fact that her right hand holding the rosary is slightly out of reach, and in a plane clearly behind the extended hand holding the holy text, suggests that the superior acts of faith may be reserved only for those who have first studied scriptures, for those who have deeply reflected on revelation, for those who have fully activated their intellects; one may seek direct access to the divine source through spiritual exercises only after due process, when it is "right" to do so (corresponding to her right hand). Occasionally the *akṣamālā* beads shown are made of crystal. This would be in keeping with this goddess' other adornments of lustrous pearls and shimmering stones, all of which are symbolic of the overwhelming presence in her person of *sattva-guṇa* (purity) and grace.

Two other details of her depiction remain to be noted. She sits with her legs crossed, an unusual pose for a female in Indian tradition. This, then, must be significant. One way of construing the pose with her right leg crossing her left at the knee is that it repeats in subtler nuances what has already been stated symbolically by her two free hands. Like them, the lower extremities also suggest the two kinds of knowledge which she dispenses and personifies. Here the two are, quite graphically, presented as higher and lower. That is to say, the raised right foot may be equated with *para-vidyā* (transcendental wisdom), while the left foot, firmly braced on the earth, pertains to *apara-vidyā* (mundane learning). The contrast between the two kinds of knowledge is even more pronounced in the delineation of Sarasvatī's flowing hair. It is black. It is in utter contrast to the rest of her radiant figure. That it remains largely hidden from view may be taken that the darkness of ignorance is dispelled in the presence of great light.

As if the redundancy of her iconography so far is not enough, consider now the peacock. It is situated on a plane lower and in

front of her. In Indian iconography the peacock is an idiomatic image for *māyā* (its name even echoes the word: *mayūra* in Sanskrit, *mayiḷ* in Tamil). With its polychromatic plumage it recapitulates in its coat of many colors the kaleidoscope of all creation. In our depiction it is worth noting that the peacock is evidently captivated by the goddess, that he appears pensive in her presence, and that he stands between us and her. Among the possible interpretations of his presence and position in the picture, one is that which suggests that inasmuch as he symbolizes the physical world in which the Hindu lives—the realm of *māyā*—he must be located in a subordinate position to indicate that he must be passed over, transcended by the aspirant who would stand alone before the goddess. That he stands at her favored right side indicates that the world of *māyā* is not forbidden or taboo; it may be used as a vehicle of transport to higher realities. As for his attitude, it is possible to view his “crowning glory,” his tail, as an exact equivalent on the animal level to Sarasvatī’s hair. Like it, his web of darkly shining feathers is composed behind him, mostly out of sight, and serves as an analogue to the former statement: here, that it is requisite that the devotee must subordinate worldly attachments in order to move near the source of wisdom. A charming touch is added by the artist of this rendering when he reveals the peacock also with one leg raised. The difference between the *vāhana*’s effort and that of Sarasvatī is that he makes his effort with the wrong (left) foot and his is an altogether graceless attempt at imitation. In this regard, it is worth remembering that the peacock becomes a suitable vehicle for the goddess only insofar as she curbs, yokes, controls, or “rides” it.

There are some temples known to be dedicated to this goddess, but they are not important as cultic centers. Her presence is found, however, in many Śiva temples where she is afforded a special place of prominence due to the wife of Brahmā, the creator. Her picture is often displayed in libraries, in the hallways of educational institutions,

in the lobbies of theaters, in the offices of publishers, on the frontispiece or lead-page of scholarly tracts, *etc.* Sarasvatī's blessings are invoked by orators, musicians, poets, teachers and students—and for obvious reasons. But it is in the home where she is honored most.

There, once a year a nine-day holiday period during September-October is held, called "Navarātri" ("Nine Days-and-Nights"), during which the goddess Durgā [q.v.] is honored in three, three-day cycles of worship addressed respectively to her manifestations as Lakṣmī, Pārvatī and Sarasvatī. It is during the third of these three, three-day cycles, especially on the mornings of the seventh, eighth, and ninth days of *Navarātri*, that Sarasvatī receives elaborate *pūjā*-honors. The main feature of these is that the eldest married male of the family supervises the efforts of all in the family to collect in one place books they are using and, if mastery be the object, musical instruments they play, and there, before an image or picture of the Lady of Learning, the Mistress of Music, to offer homage to them. The elder will himself recite *stotras* addressed to the Goddess, and the intention of all is that Sarasvatī may bless them with access to the grace she represents.

Thus Sarasvatī serves as a stimulating symbol of aspiration. Although rarely encountered in special shrines in temples of south India, hers is a genteel presence found amply honored throughout the widely dispersed Hindu domestic cult. Many girls throughout India are named after the goddess, and each time one of those names is uttered there wells forth something from the depths of memory about her virtuosity. In addition to her primary name, at least two epithets of Sarasvatī are also commonly used as girls' names—Śāradā ("The Divine Instrument" she strums), and Vāṇī ("Eloquence"). Although ancient in origin her identity to the contemporary Hindu is as timely as the fresh hope which inspires the turn to her for the blessings of her bounty.

## NOTES TO SECTION FOUR

1. Many Hindu informants, when questioned about this, seem unaware of the astrological connection and say that worship done at such times is simply to show her superiority over such superstitious beliefs. It is worth noting that most Protestant Christian services of worship in India are scheduled for late Sunday afternoon, again perhaps to demonstrate superiority over such "base" folk beliefs.
2. It is clear here, as elsewhere throughout our delineations of *devī* goddesses, that there is a blurring of identities in practice. In this case the skull-garland is an iconographic element regularly associated with the goddess in her manifestation as Kālī [q.v.]—also created as a killer.
3. Another time this aspect is stressed in her festive worship is when, in mid-November at the time when *Dīpāvalī*, or the Festival of Lights, is celebrated, Durgā is also remembered as the sister of Kṛṣṇa, who killed Pūtānā the ogress. This is a late conceit, popularized by the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.
4. In line with the possible connection of these two nine-day cycles to Durgā with harvesting and planting motifs, the fall festival of *Navarātri*—at least in Tamil Nadu—culminates with what is called "*āyutapūcai*" (Tamil for worship [*pūjā*] of weapons or tools [*āyudha*]). In this, honor is given to the tools of one's trade: farmers clean, polish and decorate their ploughs and other tools, giving them "rest" for the day; likewise, gardeners salute their spades, weavers their looms, potters their wheels, taxi-drivers their vehicles, gas station attendants their pumps, cooks their utensils, etc. It is a day when everything literally comes to a standstill—for it is both a holy day and a holiday, for cityfolk as well as for country people. In this connection, see essay elsewhere in this volume on Sarasvatī.
5. This does not preclude the possibility that, like Gajalakṣmī [q.v.], she may still remain a virgin. The north Indian (Bengali?) predilection for depicting her with a third eye in place of the *tilaka*-mark does not generally seem to be sustained in the South.
6. Her presence at Māvūr is evidently of recent origin—in this century—and may represent influence from the North surfacing in southern *devī*-worship. At Māvūr, the main image is a huge, eight-armed metal depiction of Kālī garlanded with skulls, and trampling Śiva's body. The temple in the Muthialpet section of Madras City, where the benign goddess faces South, is reputed to have been visited by the seventeenth century Marathi chieftain, Śivāji. Two other temples in the South deserve notice here in passing. One, at Tirumallairayam in Tamil Nadu, is famous because its wooden image of Kālī is worshipped only once in five years, during *Vaiśākha*-month (April-May), attracting huge crowds. The rest of the time the image—called *Āyiramkāli*—is kept in a box. At that place the goddess is worshipped



only by offerings in multiples of one thousand. The other place to be mentioned is the famous Kālī temple on a hilltop at Warangal (near Hyderabad) in the state of Andhra Pradesh. There, the aspect of the goddess Kālī is so fierce that local custom advises no one to enter the *sanctum sanctorum* unaccompanied!

7. These priests originated in the so-called "outcaste" ranks of Hindu society. Even today much of what attaches to the worship of Kālī earns condemnation from the more orthodox, Sanskritized orders of Hindus. Brahmins especially look down upon Kālī and her associated divine denizens as "*kṣudra-devatās*" ("trifling gods") or "*nīca-devatās*" ("low deities") who do not wield superior powers to grant *mokṣa* but can, at most, offer relief from mundane ailments and worldly cares. Besides, such gods as Kālī delight in blood sacrifices, anathema to most upwardly-mobile practitioners of Hinduism.
8. In the state of Andhra Pradesh all evidence seems to point to the fact that the goddess Kāmeśvarī is her incarnation there.
9. What may be an ancient rendition of this goddess' presence is found in the *sanctum sanctorum* of the Kāmākṣī Temple at Kāñcīpuram, to the left of the main image. It is referred to as "Tapah Kāmākṣī," and shows her standing in a yogic pose on one foot, one of her two hands pointing to her heart. Her association in this rendition with a tree evokes strong associations with ancient *yakṣī*-portrayals.
10. According to a legend preserved in local lore this *yoginī* was introduced to the "*Pañcabāṇa*"-*mantra* (an esoteric formula addressed to the "five-arrowed" god of love) during the ancient course of her meditations. The effect of this powerful *mantra* was twofold: not only did she achieve her end by winning the love of Śiva but also in the course of her further austerities the very weapons of Manmatha (Kāmadeva) came into her grasp.
11. That her worship reaches back beyond the Pallava period is likely, and is a matter which may be pursued by reference to one or another of the modern histories of the place.
12. The shrine to the male deity Śāstā (Ayyappaṇ? Aiyaṇār?) may evidence an earlier association of this goddess which predates her linkage with Śiva. Śekkiḷār, an ancient perigrinating Tamil writer, mentioned only the presence of the Śāstā shrine in his day.
13. For example, the Kāmākṣī Temple in the village of Māṅgāḍu, near Madras City, has in the last decade or two become a regional center for the worship of Kāmākṣī.
14. This is one of the names given by devotees to their daughters. Two other popular names associated with the cult are Kāmākṣī, of course, and Kāmeśvarī.
15. "*Ambā*" (Sanskrit) is a suffix which also means "Mother," and which, when used alone to refer to a goddess, usually indicates Pārvatī, not Māriyamman

as such.

16. A variant of this story is a tale of transposed heads. Reṇukā's severed head, according to that, became mistakenly reattached to the body of an "outcaste" woman. That is why, we are told, "only the head" is to be honored.
17. This increasingly popular complex near Madras City demonstrates in process what is known technically as "Sanskritization." Within the cult the deity in recent years is being called by a new name, "Kṛṣṇamāri"; increasingly, Brahmin priests are operating as *pūjāris* there.
18. Nowadays the traditional function of such minstrels is increasingly being performed by popular recording artists and movie-singers, whose voices blare forth over loud-speaker systems set up well in advance.
19. The presence of trees in temples throughout south India has not been particularly noted in this volume of essays. But it is the rare temple in south India without a sacred tree referred to in Sanskrit as *Sthalavṛkṣa* somewhere in its premises (cf. essays of Nāgas, also on Nammālvār and on *tulasī*-worship).
20. Ugra Pāṇḍya is the name given to the issue born of Mīnākṣī and her lord Sundarēśvara. This son is usually identified with Kumāra (= Subrahmanya = Murugaṇ [q.v.]). As his name suggests, he is fierce [*ugra*] to his enemies. Just as Mīnākṣī and her consort are identified with historical figures of the ancient Pāṇḍyan kingdom, so also is their son identified with their heir and successor in the Pāṇḍyan dynasty of yore. It may appear curiously anachronistic to some that at the annual *Cittirai*-festival, during which the marriage of the god and goddess is re-enacted, one of the chief guests of honor is none other than Ugra Pāṇḍya.
21. This feature is found in many, if not most, images which have been sanctified [*pratiṣṭhā*]. The *yantra* serves to "focus" the divine and mystic powers which the deity's icon personifies. The *yantra* is used also as a device to attract the powers into or out of the person of a specially gifted saint known for curing and/or for blessing others. The late Andhra saint, Jilleḷlamūdi Amma (d. late 1980s) often appeared for public *darśana* with a *yantra* at her feet for just this reason.
22. So today do the caretakers of the Mīnākṣī temple keep a cage of parrots and/or parakeets before her shrine, just as residents of Madurai seem especially fond of pet parakeets—in remembrance of her.
23. It is said that Brahmā was so bedazzled by her beauty that he grew his several heads in order to gaze upon her no matter on which side of him she might be.

**SECTION FIVE**

**Other Figures and  
Forms Widely Worshipped**

## **Aiyanār**

The Aiyanār cult, concentrated deep in central Tamil Nadu, demonstrates the difficulty of making generalizations when it comes to south Indian Hinduism. As a place-specific supernatural, the male deity Aiyanār is, for the most part, found housed in a shrine located near a reservoir on the outskirts of a village. He is associated with protection of the tracts which surround the area where he resides. But beyond that, his identity and his worship differ—sometimes significantly—from place to place. Casual observers of the cult are further confounded when what is seen to obtain in one village or village-cluster is apparently contradicted by what is found elsewhere near and far. The problem is further complicated in that the teachings and practices of the cult are in the main conveyed by an oral tradition. Thus there always remains doubt in regard to which specifics to utilise in order to move toward abiding generalizations. Although a few anthropological studies have emerged in recent years to counterbalance the uneven observations recorded by early travelers and missionaries, it is clear that much more must be done in a systematic and determined way to throw light on the Aiyanār cult, evidently a survival from fairly ancient times in contemporary south Indian Hinduism.

As one journeys by rail or by auto toward the interior of India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, there will appear with increasing frequency over the thickets of lush vegetation towering clay or plaster figures. Usually they are painted brightly, and the colors are radiant in the harsh, hot sun. Each proud, resplendent figure arouses wonder in the beholder, arresting attention immediately. Moving from the right-of-way toward one of the monumental statues, the traveler discovers



**Fig.31. Aiyanār**

that the impressive figure is only one set among several smaller ones, also brightly painted, the cluster comprising a kind of tabernacle. Around the outer perimeter of the grouping will be found crammed side by side hundreds of ceramic horses, ranging in size from twelve inches to five or six feet or more—some of which may be old, weathered and crumbling, some of which appear to have been placed there recently. As for the tall, towering figure, it may be a rider on a horse, or it may be a riderless horse. Sometimes it is a larger-than-life, regal, seated figure. It usually faces either east or north. Somewhere in the enclosure will be one or more trees as well as a cell-like structure, about which more in a moment.

Nearby will invariably be found a tank or lake. In the middle distance, off to the south or west, will likewise be houses indicating the village to which the shrine relates. There may or may not be anyone present at the moment in the shrine, for worshippers from the village evidently come only intermittently. Nor do these shrines in their solitary setting seem to have full-time priests on the premises.<sup>1</sup>

If we enter into the cell-like structure, we stand face-to-face with Aiyāṇār. Invariably he will be seated. He may or may not be flanked by his consorts Pūraṇī (Tamilized form: Pūraṇai) and Puṣkalā (Tamilized form: Putkalai). In our line drawing (Fig. 31) he is alone, the pedestal on which he sits showing signs of the periodic rather than the regular nature of the worship he receives in a rural setting. His posture is relaxed, his left leg propped up on the *pīṭha*-pedestal, his right leg hanging down from it—a modified *sukhāsana*- or *lalitāsana*-pose. His left arm rests at a straight angle across the raised knee of his left leg. His right hand holds a stylized *kaśā*-whip (Tamil: *ceṇṭu* and/or *koṇṭā*). He is dressed in breeches—an unusual item of apparel for a Hindu image, probably to be taken as token of his equestrian calling. Across his breast, falling from the left shoulder toward the right hip, is an *upavīta*-cord, symbolic at least of his royal rank. He wears a number of ornaments including a calf-

band, chest pendant, bracelets, armlets, epaulettes and necklace. His face is framed by flowing hair. This may indicate his active occupation which keeps him on the go, or it may be a conventionalized way to refer to the lustre ("equal to a thousand suns") which is said to radiate from his countenance.<sup>2</sup> Some images of him have what may be construed as a halo (*prabhāvalī*). His ear-lobes are long. He displays a large, round *tilaka*-mark between his brows. His flowing hair is only partially contained by his crown.

There are a number of problems which defy precise solution in regard to the personality of Aiyāṇār. Among them is his caste-identity. We have already noted that he wears an *upavīta*-cord. According to oral testimony given us, Aiyāṇār is the result of the union between Viṣṇu, who assumed an enchanting form as Mohinī, and an infatuated Śiva.<sup>3</sup> Just as his conception was not normal, so his birth was also extraordinary—he was born in the palm of Mohinī's (= Viṣṇu's) hand, for which reason one of his alternate names is "Kaiyāṇār" (*kai*, "hand" in Tamil). Accordingly, he should be granted Brahmin status. And this identity seems to be borne out, in part, when blood-sacrifices and meat-offerings are presented to his retinue of servants outside his cell-like structure; at such times a cloth is put over his face or, more often, the doors of his shrine are closed, purportedly to save him from seeing the non-vegetarian banquets.<sup>4</sup> Ambiguity abides, however, as functionally his role is martial—he is the fierce guardian of the village boundaries, ruler of the fields he surveys and protects.<sup>5</sup> It is generally understood that at night he rides around the village perimeter, reckless and ruthless in his pursuit of predators seen and unseen. Villagers know this, and prefer not to venture beyond the village borders at night—for the risk to them is great. The powerful Aiyāṇār in his bid to overpower the demons (*bhūtas*) of the night, could accidentally injure or even kill an innocent pedestrian. In the daytime, of course, he is calm and contained within his residence in the shrine, a safe haven in which villagers may "see" him.



Another problem pertains to his functional relationship to the fields. His nightly sojourns suggest that he is nothing more—or less—than a fierce guardian of the village and its surrounding fields. In this he fulfils the functions of a *grāma-devatā*; and so he is usually classified. Yet, his propensity to ponds, lakes and resevoirs suggests his activities have at least as much to do with protection against drought, that is to say, that he functions in large part also as an agricultural god. His periodic worship suggests he is approached (placated?) at critical moments rather than on a regular, uninterrupted schedule. And, those times when his shrine is busiest seem to be after a harvest, during a drought, and when other calamities threaten to alter the natural cycle of the seasons.

Some informants suggest possibilities of partnership with some of the local village goddesses, in particular with Māriyamman. These relationships appear to us at best strained. For one thing, the goddess Māriyamman has her own cult separate from Aiyaṇār, with separate priests, jurisdictions, festivals, *etc.* (see essay on Māriyamman elsewhere in this volume). For another thing, she usually has her abode in the village, not outside it. As if the foregoing were not enough, it is worth recalling that Aiyaṇār is normally depicted with two virginal wives, neither of whom can be identified satisfactorily with Māriyamman.

Yet one more puzzle surrounds his identity: and it is a considerable one. Although he is generally given central placement in the shrine area, it is in fact not to him at all that the most spectacular offerings are made. It is instead his assistants and companions who receive the most outspoken praise and glorification. Among his much favored comrades—to be found in the court surrounding Aiyaṇār's enclosure—are Karuppuccāmi ("the Black One"), maybe also Muttaiya and in some places but not at Madurai the image of an historical personality, Madurai Vīraṇ, a folk-hero dating back probably to the seventeenth century. Who are they juxtaposed to him, or, rather, who is he; when, juxtaposed to his retinue?

To the worshippers of Aiyaṇār these problems remain, literally, academic. They go to him because they sense he has power. That it is diffuse and ambiguous merely lends mystery to that power. That no one observes his midnight rides merely attests to the fact that he works his wonders unseen. He is praised, we know, at harvest time. It has also been observed that he is petitioned in time of drought. So also at times of natural calamities, such as floods and cyclones, his help is sought. When villagers enter into dispute over boundaries, Aiyaṇār becomes the adjudicator. In family feuds, he is the mediator. He can locate lost items including cattle and coin. He can control and cure diseases. He can still stammering swiftly and surely. Families with marriages impending, issue their invitations in the name of Aiyaṇār, and the newly wedded couple repair to his temple soon after the marriage to seek his blessings. His sometimes obscure function as a fertility god comes into sharper focus as childless couples come to him for progeny.

To be sure, these are functions which can also be taken care of—and are, for many—by other powerful, local gods. It seems a matter of choice, then, to seek out the sanctuary of Aiyaṇār for these favors. The call of this lone ranger evokes strong allegiances. Even individuals who have long since moved away from their natal village continue throughout their lives to feel claimed by the particular Aiyaṇār of their original home. And, each Aiyaṇār of each place is subtly different—one may be known as “the Aiyaṇār who carries a big sword,” another may be known as “the Aiyaṇār of *n*-village,” still another as “the Aiyaṇār with the ankle chain,” and so on. Some south Indians living in far off lands periodically mail cheques and international money-orders in order to perpetuate the worship of the particular “field deity” at the place of their birth. Families who have emigrated to such cities as Madras maintain continuing relationship with the Aiyaṇār of their native place by propitiating him as a *kula-devatā* (“family deity”) in their daily *pūjā*.

Just as the local Aiyāṇār cults differ markedly from place to place, so the role of the priests varies from one village to another. In some places the role of the priest is assumed by a lineage of potters of the village, in other words, by those who hereditarily supply the clay figures for his shrine. In some other places the priest appears to be one who is gifted as an oracle, an ecstatic, particularly one who can enter trance-states easily and serve as "medium" to Aiyāṇār when his counsel is sought. In many cases such shamans surface right within the potter communities. At a few places, so it is reported, Brahmins serve as official functionaries in tandem with a local specialist who, on their behalf, attends to the occasional and requisite blood-offerings.

Thus do the patterns of worship vary considerably from one shrine to another. As already mentioned, some shrines seem to attract votaries only on such special occasions as when the first fruits of harvest are offered—a time, not incidentally, when tillers of the soil have at last the wherewithal to sponsor a thanksgiving. At other shrines it is quite clear that bi-weekly services are held on Tuesdays and Fridays. Some informants aver that the Full Moon Day (*purnimā*) is a day of each month especially significant for this deity of the fields. Once a year, during the month of *Vaiśākha* (April-May; according to the solar reckoning prevalent in Tamil Nadu, the month of *Cittirai*) there will be seen at certain Aiyāṇār shrines a celebration lasting up to ten days. The exact purpose of this remains undisclosed to us although the fact that in the deep interior of Tamil Nadu it is invariably a time of searing heat, when leaves wither on the trees and plants shrivel in the soil, makes it tempting to guess what motives operate.

It may well be that Aiyāṇār is an ancient Dravidian deity whose place in Hinduism has been, as it were, negotiated by the coinage of legends which give him brāmanical antecedents. Even the prevailing, scholastic method of construing the name "Aiyāṇār" to come from "Ārya," a term of respect and connoting Sanskritic origins, may itself be based on a corruption of a more purely Tamil name, "Kaiyāṇār."



**Fig.32. Ayyappan**

To be sure, even this is utilized now to assert that the god was born in the palm of Mohini's hand. But in the ancient poetic utterances of the Tamils the imagery of the extended, helping hand—for that matter, the imagery of the smiting hand of vengeance—is not an isolated one. There is no reason why it could not have become associated with an indigenous deity's name. Whatever may be the case, this deity appears to have a long folk tradition behind him.

Museums in Madras and Madurai have several small processional images of him, mostly in metal, showing the variety of iconographical conventions used in his portrayal. But what is more impressive is that there are so many, and that the tradition seems to go back so many centuries. Sometimes he is shown on an elephant; that may be a regionalism.<sup>6</sup> But, more often, he is portrayed on a horse. Both mounts have a rich heritage behind them. The elephant's depiction dates back to the ancient Indus Valley period. As for the horse, it has been one of the perpetually reiterated motifs in India's rural and tribal art. Its use in *vīra*-stones ("hero-memorials") signifies its recognized supportive role in heroic themes in ages past in Tamil Nadu itself. The horse's powerful and striking features still fascinate local craftsmen, and they continue to strive to capture that forcefulness in wicker, leather and cloth effigies, and—most successfully, perhaps—in the terracotta steeds which are used in Aiyāṇār worship. And it is thus that horses of every size from diminutive to colossal are to be found, when traveling through Tamil Nadu, shimmering in the sun, set upon the soil which gave them their origins.

## 32

### **Ayyappan**

The origins of the deity Ayyappan are obscure. What seems clear is this ancient divinity had primal association with fields, borders, jungles; evidently he was also a folk-god who dispensed boons, especially healing cures. Today, Ayyappan is the central figure in a growing cult radiating

from a center located on the summit of one of the Śabari Hills in the state of Kerala in south India. The cult, currently strongest in Kerala, is spreading with visible effect into the adjoining state of Tamil Nadu, and there are outposts of its influence in places as far away as Bombay. Although Ayyappaṇ as "Śāstā" and/or as "Hari-Hara-putra"—two epithets which will be explained in a moment—is identified in brāmanical legend with the pan-Indian deities Viṣṇu and Śiva, the overwhelming evidence of the contemporary cult indicates he is essentially a south Indian supernatural.

The name "Ayyappaṇ" is usually construed as "Ārya" (Sanskrit for "clean," "ritually pure," "respectable" originally; later taking on the sense of "an elder," hence "father") conjoined with "Appan" (Tamil for "father"), giving the sense of "Father of Fathers," a term of ultimate respect and veneration. Two other names by which Ayyappaṇ is known have already been noted, in passing above. "Śāstā" means "one who rules," and carries with it overtones of "a stern disciplinarian"; when linked, as it often is, with "Dharma"—as in "Dharma Śāstā"—the name refers to a divine whose discipline leads to true *dharma*, that is, to spiritual fulfillment. "Hari-Hara-putra" is a name which refers to his genesis as the son [*putra*] to Viṣṇu [*Hari*] and Śiva [*Hara*], and recalls the mythic complex preserved in the folk songs and local lore of Coorg and Kerala telling of the seduction by Viṣṇu in an enchanting form as Mohinī of the infatuated Śiva, which encounter resulted in the birth of this child. In fact, the legend goes on to say that the infant child was left in the jungle to fend for himself, and there he was suckled and nurtured by tigresses—emblems even today for this ever-youthful deity's *vāhana*. Another name is also often used to refer to this god. When he was born, he had a jewel around his neck, a bell—hence the name "Maṇikaṇṭha" (*maṇi*, "jewel"; *kaṇṭha*, "neck"). Yet one more epithet, "Bhūtanātha," refers to his lordship over the *bhūtas*, in which connection "*bhūtas*" may be understood to mean the "five elements" (earth, water, fire, air and ether), the "evil spirits" which range abroad, especially at night, or all "living beings" in the created order.<sup>7</sup>

Depictions of Ayyappaṇ have become quite standardized. As in our line-drawing (Fig. 32), he is invariably shown young, and usually in a seated posture called *paryāṅkabandhana*, or *utkuṭikāsana*, featuring a peculiar band surrounding his body at the knees. This band or belt is called a "yogapaṭṭa," and is symbolic of the youth's yogic control and ascetic vigor, especially in terms of his celibacy. It also contributes to the image he projects as a powerful spirit of inexhaustible, pent-up energy. He is decorated with anklets, a gem-studded waistband and a cincture at the chest, bracelets and armlets, necklaces (including one with a pendant bell or, sometimes, a pendant gem), earrings and crown. His forehead displays the *ūrdhva-puṇḍra*, a mark which proclaims the nurture of this movement in the matrix of Vaiṣṇava piety. The long, flowing hair—also a regular feature—reiterates the notion of latent powers both physical and spiritual at his command. This latter iconographic statement is sometimes stressed yet again by indicating in his hands a bow and arrows which, in turn, refer not only to his ability as a hunter to tame or to dispatch the wild powers of nature but also to his grace as a marksman to stir or to silence the restless rhythm of the heart. Here, in our line-drawing, his two hands demonstrate approximately the same ideas. In his right hand is seen the *upadeśa-mudrā* of initiation (into a life of virtue and obedience) which is at the same time also the *jñāna-mudrā/cin-mudrā* of spiritual wisdom (leading to final emancipation). His left arm and hand dangle languidly over his raised left knee in the "gaja-hasta" pose, evocative of his origins in, and continuing relationship to, the jungle [*gaja*, "elephant; *hasta*, "arm"]. This hand also points to the earth, the very substance from which arise the fields and forests, mountains and rivers which he ranges as guardian and sprite. When he is seen thus in his abode at Śabari, the gesture of course may also be understood to indicate that place specifically, resort to which assures spiritual renewal. In our rendering of him, Ayyappaṇ—and most depictions of him show this as well—sits on a plinth, or pedestal, not unlike the kind found supporting the Śiva-



*linga* [q.v.] in shrines throughout India; the spout permits run-off of the liquid ghee which priests pour over the image as part of *pūjā*-routines.

Ayyappa's hill shrine at Śabari, center of the cult, is acknowledged generally to be one of the most inaccessible pilgrimage spots in the South. The arduous journey to the sacred slope takes one on foot over trackless paths through grassy meadows, up gentle slopes, across sprawling streams, into jungle fastnesses, and finally up the precipitous trail to the top of the plateau where the temple is situated. The journey may be made by anyone regardless of caste, creed, country of origin, or condition—Ayyappa, the Father of all, is very generous and hospitable. The only persons prohibited are women—although exception is made to young girls who have not yet experienced menstruation, and to women who have reached menopause.<sup>8</sup> Large groups of pilgrims, sometimes numbering into hundreds of thousands, are seen to go to Śabari at three different times each year. One of these is in mid-April (*Viṣu*, the Malayali New Year, usually coinciding more or less with the Tamil New Year that starts off the Tamil month of *Cittirai*, cf. *Vaiśākha*-month of *amānta* reckoning). Another is later, in time for the Malayali festival of *Onam* (in the Malayali month of *Cingam*, more or less corresponding to the *amānta* month of *Śrāvaṇa*, July-August, the Tamil solar month of *Āvaṇi*). But by far the greatest number of pilgrims throng the hill sanctuary between mid-November and mid-January (more specifically between *Vṛścika-saṁkrānti* and *Makara-saṁkrānti*) in anticipation of the winter solstice. At these times foot-weary pilgrims approach the area wearing blue, black, or ochre garments. Around their necks may be a necklace either of *tulasī*- or *rudrākṣa*-beads, and on their heads they carry a special cloth bag. The bag is called an "*Irumuḍi*," and it contains two compartments, one for items of worship, the other for personal belongings. The bag has an esoteric symbolism, the two component sections standing for the divine and human realms which are ever in intimate association in the journey through life. The pilgrims, though they will

have been observing a restricted diet and practising other ascetic restraints, are far from subdued as they near the end of their trek. Melodious greetings fill the air, "*Śaraṇam Ayyappa !*" ("I surrender to thee, O father of fathers!"), to which in full-throated antiphony is heard, "*Svāmiye śaraṇam Ayyappa!*" ("Lord Ayyappaṇ is the only resort!").

The shrine, once reached, is simple in construction, with the sloping roofs characteristic of the Kerala idiom of temple architecture. In the innermost chamber is the image of the youthful Ayyappaṇ. But before approaching it one must ascend a flight of 18 steps<sup>9</sup> leading to the final rise where the temple is located. After circumambulating Ayyappaṇ's sanctuary the pilgrim makes offerings of ghee and *vibhūti* through the priests, portions of which are handed back as *prasādam*. The sanctified remnants are believed to possess great curative power. The pilgrim then moves on to visit nearby shrines on the hilltop dedicated to Gaṇeśa [q.v.], to Subrahmaṇya, to one of the manifestations of the great goddess [Mallikāppurathammā], to two snake spirits, and to Vavar—the latter worshipped in an empty sanctum tended by a "Muslim priest,"<sup>10</sup> and representing a Muslim hero who was converted to a militant faith in Ayyappaṇ. When the visitor leaves the sacred area he descends the 18 steps backwards so that his last glimpse of the sanctuary may remain vividly in his mind.

A striking feature which surfaces time and again whenever one sounds depths of this cult and its varied practices is its easy-going eclecticism. Primarily what one witnesses in it is an incorporation into a folk-cult of certain, obvious brāhmanical traditions (a process technically known to anthropologists and historians of religions as "Sanskritization"). Explanation of Ayyappaṇ's genesis from brāhmanical deities is merely one of the most apparent attempts in this direction; more subtle are the intrusions of Sanskritic terminology and conceptualizations into the layered, indigenous texture of speech and thought. Another instance of synthesis is the attempt to bring together Viṣṇuism and Śivaism by identifying Ayyappaṇ as the common child of the

two great gods. The melding of these two normally discrete movements is also seen in the commingling of iconographic codes converging in the figure of the god himself—and in the pilgrim who genially wears either *tulāsi*-beads (sacred to Viṣṇu) or *rudrākṣa*-beads (usually associated with Śiva). Other instances of syncretism abound—one has only to mention the juxtaposition of a “Muslim” presence in the sacred “Hindu” complex, to say nothing of the relaxed attitude adopted by devotees of Ayyappaṇ to include in their worship cycle votive offerings to diverse gods. Despite the mark on Ayyappaṇ’s forehead which, as already noted, identifies him visibly with the matrix of Viṣṇuism, it must be observed that the majority of his worshippers are, as is the deity himself, heirs of his patrimony. For we notice in the cult, always and everywhere, semblances of Śivaite piety; indeed, many of Ayyappaṇ’s devotees, when not worshipping him in his holy place, worship Śiva in his various shrines. To be sure what attracts pilgrims *most* to Ayyappaṇ is the firm conviction that he, the youthful and disciplined deity of pent-up energy, has the sure power to grant boons, to heal wounds, to cure weakness, to restore potency, to save lives!

A few words, before closing, may be said about vows and their relationship to pilgrimage. For, in Hinduism, the resort to a holy place of power and potency is almost always preceded by a period of penitence, usually undertaken in the form of a vow. The same pattern prevails in the Ayyappaṇ cult but, there, is many times magnified in comparison to that is seen elsewhere in Hindu praxis. The difference is not in kind but in degree. Before a pilgrim may make the trip to the Śabari shrine during the winter months he must take upon himself a vow which pledges him to 41 days of chastity, restricted diet (*i.e.*, no meat, no alcohol, no drugs, no tobacco, *etc.*), specified hygiene (*e.g.*, no shaving, no betel, *etc.*) and positive acts of piety (*viz.*, thinking kindly thoughts, repeating Ayyappaṇ’s names, singing certain devotional songs, visiting holy places, keeping company with the pious, *etc.*). It is during the latter phases of this penitential period that the aspiring pilgrim starts from his home for the shrine,

timing his departure so that his arrival at the sacred site coincides with the final day of his vow. Well into his period of penance, when the ascetic acts will have begun to exert a palpable effect on his consciousness, he also vests himself in the special garb required of all pilgrims for their journey (blue, black, or ochre clothing). So, just as his personality will have begun to change, his appearance will also undergo a change. Next along the way his name changes, too—for during the sacred circuit all who have likewise prepared to go to Śabari call one another nothing else than “Svāmi” or “Ayyappa!” Beyond this, the experience of penetrating further into the jungle, moving ever further inward and upward, where the only mode of transport is self-effort, the pilgrim experiences something of the total transformation of mind and body and self that is the ultimate and final process of becoming one with God. The climax—viewing the deity at the summit of the mountain—is, then, a foretaste of the sweet communion and blessed ecstasy in store for those who are claimed by the Lord as His own. So it is, then, that this contemporary cult celebrating a regional deity’s presence and power illuminates the efficacy of age-old vows in the process of undertaking pilgrimage.

Finally, the Ayyappan cult once, hill-bound is spreading. The popularity of this deity has something to do with a growing perception of his “power,” however construed; it has also something to do no doubt with the already mentioned easy-going eclecticism allowed to its votaries who hail from—and often maintain ties with—other sectors of Hinduism. Small shrines to Ayyappan are nowadays to be found widely disseminated in urban areas of the South, in homes, in by-ways off neighborhood streets, in large business establishments. A good index of the movement of the cult out from Kerala is the appearance in the early 1980s in Adyar, a suburb of Madras City, of a large Ayyappan temple. Its plan replicates the Śabari shrines even to the extent that its central shrine sits on a small (artificial?) knoll. Its architectural style features characteristic motifs of Kerala. Even more noteworthy, however, are the numbers of devotees from the surrounding city who

seek out the site for visitation. Likewise, farther north are artifacts testifying to the spread of this southern deity's worship—in Bombay will be found a shrine to Ayyappaṇ, and in Delhi there are two!

### 33

## **Murukaṇ**

No account of devotionism in south India would be adequate without giving appropriate attention to the Murukaṇ cult in Tamil Nadu State.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the south, indeed, the devotion centering on the handsome hill-god takes a place perhaps second only to the faith observed in the lord Venkaṭeśvara [q.v.], the influence of which somewhat more clearly extends beyond the South and into other parts of the subcontinent in contemporary times. But in peninsular India, just as they have done for ages, the two vie for supremacy in numbers of devotees. Any alert student of religions, after even a superficial survey of the two movements, will be struck not only by the similarity of the two central figures, but also by the correlation of certain cultic activities associated with both. But our purpose here is not to draw comparisons and contrasts; we defer to our adopted style of discrete description and, further, limit ourselves to the phenomenon of Murukaṇ in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Let us begin by acknowledging that when a cult hero such as Murukaṇ ("The Beautiful One") is known by so many different names and epithets, this in itself may suggest some matters important to consider. It would appear to us that his array of aliases attests not only to his abiding place in the hearts of Hindus of different social and regional origins but also says something about the sustaining fascination his multiple personality holds for his votaries. We shall merely list here some of the better-known designations of this youthful deity, commencing with those that, more clearly, associate this hill-god with Sanskritic traditions: Cēyōṇ, "Lord of the Hills"; Valan, "God"; Kanda, "the Lord"; Skanda, "the One who jumps, leaps,



**Fig.33. Murukan**

or bounces"; Vēlāyudhan, "He who carries the Vēl-weapon (of spiritual discrimination)"; Guha, "the One who dwells in the cave (of the heart[?])"; Viśākha, "One born under the *Viśākha*-asterism"; Śaravaṇabhava, "He who was born on the (razor-) sharp marshgrass"; Śanmukha, "He who has six faces"; Kārttikeya, "Sone of the six mothers known as *Kṛttikās*"; Kumāra, "the Youth, the younger One"; Bālaguru and/or Kumāraguru, "He who as a youth was Teacher (to his father)"; Senāni, "the Lord of the divine armies (against evil)"; Subrahmaṇya, "He whose nature is of the highest Brahman." While this list by no means exhausts Murukan's many names, it does give some clues as to his identity and, certainly, each epithet recalls to the devotee some episode from the many legends which have accumulated around this richly diffuse personality.

Representations of Murukan are of two types: those which show him with his consorts, Vallī on his right and Devāyānā on his left, and those which depict him as a solitary figure. He is sometimes shown with six heads and appropriately numerous arms, but more often we see him with one head, two arms. In most instances, but not all (*i.e.*, when he is depicted astride a peacock), he is revealed standing. But however else he may be disposed, the most constant and striking feature of this deity is his handsome and youthful countenance—which is suggested by the accompanying line-drawing (Fig. 33). Here, as usual, he is dressed in a dhotī, and is ornamented with anklets (hidden), bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and a crown. He wears also the *upavīta*-cord. His hair, as here, is generally shown long and flowing. He is invariably revealed with, hence recognized by, his *śakti*-weapon ("Vēl, in Tamil), a spear. Also, as is normative, he is shown with his peacock-*vāhana*. His right hand demonstrates the benevolent *abhaya-hasta*, the left hand falls in the downward-pointing *varāda-hasta*, the two together promising plenteous boons to those who fall at his feet.

In order better to comprehend the "meaning" of this iconography, we must know more about his deity. Not unexpectedly, there are several different legends which account for Murukan's birth and present



eminence. Collectively what these would seem to indicate is that this figure mediates to us a vigorous, independent folk deity associated with hills and hunting, curatives and conquests, who has in the course of time been absorbed, more or less successfully, into the Sanskrit traditions associated with Śiva, especially in his guise as Somāskanda [q.v.], sometimes also with Agni. Quite clearly what is emphasized time and again, is Murukan's juvenile vigor. Even when he is shown as an infant, it is obvious that as a baby he is an evocative image of stainless purity as well as an innocent reminder of latent power.<sup>12</sup> In his more mature, heroic aspects the vitality and resourcefulness which he has at his command ramify not only from his forceful figure but also radiate from his glistening spear. He stands ready to meet and to conquer the powers of evil and darkness. Above all, his spear serves as an ever-erect paradigm of penetrating power—whether that be construed as phallic or intellectual—and is, moreover, a splendid symbol of solar regeneration. With his quickening spear he first of all attracts our attention and, beyond that, for those who are most vulnerable to his dashing presence, he impales with its radiant shaft the devotee's heart, dispels his "victim's" inner gloom, and dispatches that being to higher realms of spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

All these messages are, as it were, coded into depictions of Murukan (our line-drawing is no exception) "for those who have eyes to see." As for the two animals most often associated with him—the peacock as his *vāhana*, and the rooster as his banner mascot—those reiterate on the animal level what he personifies at the spiritual range. One is the harbinger of the fructifying rain, the other is the herald of the rising sun. In neither case of his theriomorphic companions is the symbolism simple or univalent. Just as the peacock represents more than just fertility so also the rooster stands for more than merely a new day. As with any symbols there are always further levels of meaning to locate. Murukan's peacock is, for example, also an apt symbol for *māyā* ("cosmic illusion," the principle that deludes one into dependence on day-to-day experience as the ultimate discovery).

Its very name—*mayūra* in Sanskrit, *mayiḷ* in Tamil—amplifies this concept. As proud possessor of many colors, both captivating and commanding by its natural presence in full array, it infatuates one beholding it with its entrancing beauty. Thus, in depictions such as the one here, it is worth noting that the peacock—constant companion of Murukan, his mysterious mount, the *vāhana* that carries him about and brings him immediately into view to any and all in this world of mortals—stands behind his master, and at his feet, waiting at the beck and call of him whose beauty subdues its own. The placement and attitude of the bird is no haphazard whim of our artist: the point is that Murukan does, in truth, stand between us and it. The youthful and stunningly beautiful god is our protector and guardian from the otherwise inevitable influence of and involvement with *māyā*. He stands, as it were, calling attention to himself; the trceries which represent worldly enchantment are placed appropriately in the background. Enamored by his charm and comeliness, smitten by his beauty, we are to present ourselves prostrate at his feet, obedient to his command to remain on his safe side in response to his gentle gesture of grace.<sup>14</sup>

In depictions of Murukan with his consorts—also popular—the symbolism is, because more ample, more complex. On his right, imagine Valli, of dark complexion, the daughter of a hunter chieftain. Her name means, literally, “creeper; tendril of a young and growing plant”; she stands at his side seeking, as it were, her lord’s support and guidance—which he promises. Hence she is to be seen as an incarnation of dependent love as well as, perhaps anomalously, of valor (her paternal heritage, her dowry). She is the embodiment [*śakti*] of will-power yet to be directed by the disposition of her master. On his left, consider Devāyānā, like her lord of rosy complexion, the daughter of Indra, king of heaven. Her name means, literally, “She who leads the gods”; by her presence she actively brings to him the strategical supremacy of the heavenly hosts (her paternal heritage, her dowry). She is the incarnation [*śakti*] of realized *kriyā*-powers of preservation. So, on the one hand, the static aspect of the Ground of

Being, on the other hand, the dynamic aspect of Godhead. Murukan, quite graphically, stands in the middle graced by both as the Lord, the Controller, the Sustainer of the universe.

There are six important centers in the state of Tamil Nadu associated with the cult of Murukan. Devotees often vow to visit all six of these places at least once in their lifetimes. Hence, each is an important and busy spot in the region for pilgrimage. First to be mentioned is the town of Paḷaṇi in the west-central part of the state where Murukan as "Daṇḍāyudhapāni" ("He who holds a *daṇḍa*-staff") is worshipped in his hilltop temple. Then there is Tiruchendūr, on the coast in the southeast corner of the state, where Murukan as "Subrahmanya" is worshipped in his impressive shore temple. Next is the village of Swāmimalai in the east-central part of the state where Murukan as "Svāminātha" is worshipped in a temple on a knoll. Also, there is Tirupparaṅkunram, a village just southwest of the city of Madurai where, on a small hillock, Murukan is worshipped in an imposing, larger-than-life image. And, at Paḷamutircolai, also not far from Madurai to the northeast, but difficult of access, is a beautiful sylvan setting where, on a hilltop, is Murukan's temple. Finally, there is Tiruttāṇi, a big town inland from Madras City, near the border of the state of Andhra Pradesh, where the popular Lord's shrine is situated on a rocky eminence. Each one of these spots is associated with an episode in Murukan's life—one being the place where he chose to take up residence when he became estranged from his parents (a matter treated elsewhere in this volume, in our essay on Somāskanda [q.v.]); another where he rinsed the gore from his *vēl*-spear after his bloody battle against the demon Śūrapadma; yet another is built on the spot where he supposedly married Vallī; and so forth. To these, and to Paḷaṇi in particular, pilgrims repair—often with offerings carried on their shoulders in unique, yoke-like contrivances called "*kāvadis*." Such pilgrimages and offerings are made to him who, in return, is believed to reward his devotees with spiritual renewal, inner peace and better self-understanding.

As at the hill complex to Lord Venkateśvara at Tirupati-Tirumalai, so also at the most popular Murukan sanctuaries, there seem always to be queues of pilgrims eagerly waiting to file past the holy of holies where they may glimpse the radiant face of their Lord. Sometimes an overflowing enthusiasm bursts the bounds in unison chants—"Mu-ru-HA! Mu-ru-HA! Mu-ru-HA!"—as the faithful file approaches the innermost shrine. In Murukan temples, *hundis*-depositories are prominently found, into which are thrust offerings of cash and other valuables, including peanuts which popular tradition proclaims are favorite snacks of the Lord, as offerings from laypersons. The full-time staffs who are employed around the clock to count and verify the income from the *hundis* can be seen contentedly chewing the peanuts as they cull through the offerings in the course of their chores. And, as at Venkateśvara's sacred complex farther north so also at Murukan's chief places of worship, offerings of human hair are made, the tonsured pilgrims plighting this sacrifice in exchange for more coveted boons.

All who enter the Lord's presence hope to emerge rewarded in some way, an outward symbol of this inward hope being the omnipresent, jam-like relish, called "*Pañcāmṛta*," that is dispensed by an officiating priest. This is a preserve of five [*pañca*-] foods known to be "sweet" to the Lord—grapes, bananas, honey, ghee, and rock candy—and is believed to nurture immortality [*-amṛta*] in true believers. Hence, pilgrims take this quick-energy food gratefully, and they may be seen moving out from the inner temple licking the blessed right hand that has received in it the life-giving, reviving ambrosia. In many ways such as this, it is easy to sense the living faith that Murukan's grace is felt to be sufficient to sustain all. And, it takes no student of sociology to discern that the crowds of devotees who flock to the centers of Murukan worship are not drawn only from the most elevated sections of Hindu society. This good-looking god entrances a cross-section of Tamil Nadu's millions, not the least among whom are those who come from humble origins.

Four festivals are important to the followers of Murukan, and they are celebrated wherever the cult is found—in the hundreds of Murukan temples in Tamil Nadu especially, of course, but no less in other shrines to him throughout the South and in his strongholds found as far afield as in Sri Lanka and in Singapore. These four may be viewed as recapitulating in some sense the career of this deity. The first of these comes in *Kārttika*-month (October-November, on the fifth day of the “bright” fortnight, which according to Tamil solar reckoning could fall either in the Tamil *Aippaci* month or *Karttikai* month, depending on the year). It is known as “*Skanda Śaṣṭi*,” and celebrates the Lord’s birth over a 7-day period during which there are pageants and processions which play out once more the bloody battle in which the heroic god beheaded demons. It is, quite appropriately, also a time of sober thanksgiving, of fasting and of prayer. Then, not long after, in *Mārgaśīrṣa*-month (November-December, or *Karttikai* according to the Tamil solar reckoning), when nights continue to grow longer, a “Festival of Lights” [*Karttikai Dīpam*] is celebrated in honor of the deity’s six foster mothers, the nymphs of the Pleiades known as the “*Kṛttikās*.” The third Murukan festival is perhaps the most vivid of all. It is a 10-day festival, putatively a “marriage ceremony”—and there are re-enactments at virtually all Murukan temples of Murukan’s marriage to *Vaḷḷi* and/or to *Devāyānā* with great *éclat*—but clearly something more complex than that. The time is *Caitra* (March-April, or *Paikuṇi* according to the Tamil solar reckoning): the vernal equinox is near. It is a time that reflects equanimity both cosmic and, equally significant, psychic. Not only is this a period when nights and days are in serene balance but it is also a time of vows by the faithful to demonstrate their tranquillity in the face of torturous feats of endurance. Only the most ardent can have the spiritual strength and stoic tolerance to make manifest the supernatural, sustaining power of faith. To any witness of such dramatic displays, it is indeed impressive to see the blessed few transport themselves by means of hook-swinging, bearing the pain of piercing skewers,

walking on live coals, and the like, all the while unperturbed in their states of ecstasy and rapture. The fourth festival of note here marks the attainment by Murukan of his full powers, his integration into a single supreme being, and his sovereignty over the universe. It falls in *Jyēṣṭha* (May-June, or *Vaikāci* according to the Tamil solar reckoning), more precisely, it culminates on the last Full Moon before the summer solstice. It is known as "*Vaiśākha Viśākham*," and features colorful parades with priceless palanquins and parasols and other accouterments designed to please the luminous lord. In addition to these annual festivals the liturgical calendar of the Murukan cult is punctuated by monthly [*māsotsava*] and semi-monthly [*pakṣotsava*] celebrations, in addition to the daily offices regularly performed in all the Murukan temples. Moreover, the Murukan cult, as evidence of its association with Śiva traditions, also marks major Śaiva holidays.

How else can one recognize a living tradition of devotion and commitment? Perhaps effulgence of faith is radiated abroad most meaningfully in those tender moments when, at the times it comes to select an auspicious and charming name for a child, devotees christen their little ones with one of the many names of the Lord Murukan. Among the popular names deriving from the cult are the following for boys: Arumugham, Swaminathan, Velayudham, Velappan, Dandapani, Kandan, Balaguru, Balagurunathan, Guruswami, (Bala) Subramanian, Shanmukam, Kumaran, Kumaraswamy, Manivel, Guhan, Palani and, of course, Murukan. Girls are given such names as Valli, Devayānai and Palanee. Any one who has visited Tamil Nadu (or other places in south India) will immediately recognize some of the names just mentioned as ones, hitherto unrecognized, belonging to friends and acquaintances. They are telling tokens of a living faith.

## 34

**The Nāgas and Their Worship**

Early in the morning, having bathed but not yet broken the fast of the preceding night, women track there barefoot. In the half-light of dawn they will take from the small bags carried with them the various offerings they have brought—a small earthenware lamp, camphor, fragrant powders, a few fruits, a small quantity of cow's milk. After cautiously sprinkling some water around the base of the area, they will draw some auspicious marks on the ground in confirmation that where they are is a sacred space. Taking a match, the small lamp is quickly lit, the camphor ignited. Red powder is reverently smeared on the lithic slabs implanted there, and on the tree trunk against which some of the stones may lean. Fruits are placed tentatively on the ground, and milk is cautiously poured down holes reputed to be snakes' lairs. When done, they circumambulate the place in a clockwise fashion three, nine or eighteen times, all the while praying to the *nāgas* believed to dwell there to bless them, their husbands, their children.

So it is daily that one of the most ancient forms of popular Hindu worship proceeds. There is no center for the cult—it is found wherever stone tablets carved with serpentine forms are found. Those slabs are called "*nāgakkals*" in Tamil, "*nāgarāyis*" in Telugu, and "*nāgakallus*" in Kannada. And, they are usually concentrated under the spreading hulks of banyan or peepul trees. The trees may be located by the roadside, or within the precincts of a temple.<sup>15</sup> The stones wherever found, according to the lore of the neighborhood, mark a place inhabited by latent powers of fecundity; not incidentally the place invariably coincides with an ancient tree [*naga*] and the presence of a live snake [*nāga*] or two.

In Hinduism, snakes are held to be both malevolent and benevolent creatures. On the one hand, they can be formidable adversaries, quick to strike, deadly when thwarted, loath to forgive offenses. Their curses





**Fig.34. Nāgakkal**

are dreaded. Their very sight is avoided. They have been relegated to the lower world, according to Hindu mythology, as the result of a sentence passed on them by Brahmā. Their forked tongues are the effect of their brazen attempt to lick *amṛta* (the "elixir of life") from the sharp blades of *kuśa*-grass. On the other hand, they can be estimable allies, slow to anger, loyal in unrequited service. Their blessings are sought. Even to dream about them is a good omen. They are harbingers in the rainy season of the fertility sure to follow. As symbols of the dark and unknown recesses of the underground they are associated with creation and procreation, propagation and plenitude. The word *nāga* itself results from a double negative [*na* + *aga*], and refers to that which is not immobile, or, that which moves. It carries with it associations of all which teems, the ever-flowing, indiscriminate abundance of nature, at one moment savage, at another moment serene.

It is not surprising, then, that the ladies of the morning approach with such awe the ancient arenas. There is where the powers which must be appeased reside. If gratified, the potent *nāgas* will bless; if offended, the cold-blooded serpents will smite. And how do those creatures of power demonstrate their wills? To one who pleases them, prayers will be answered for fertility (e.g., a wished-for conception will materialize); petitions will be honored for safe deliveries; pleas for long life will be granted for whomever is named. To one who exasperates them, various calamities will ensue—impotency, sterility, deformed or stillborn children, untimely deaths, debilitating illnesses.

The inscrutability of the recompense meted out by the *nāgas* for one's actions is only overshadowed by the mystery of what precedes it, an altogether artless act. Just as the miracle of birth is superceded only by the wonder of the astonishing exercise which necessarily precedes it, so the enigma of the *nāgas'* response is somehow bound up with the prior deed—the infusion of white liquid into a dark, hidden cavity—a maneuver performed in all innocence by the votary, yet one which nevertheless daringly replicates in the very presence of the

darkling powers the marvel of procreation with which they are so intimately identified. Or, at another level, surely the sense of participation in a primeval sacrifice does not elude the women as they approach the sinuous slabs at the ancient arbor-post and solemnly stain them with blood-red power. Yet, the worship of the *nāgas* takes on numinous adumbrations only for those who stand at a distance and see it in the half-light; to the individual involved it retains all the vivid pragmatism of a practical business transaction.

Tuesdays and Fridays seem to be days when worship of the *nāgas* is especially opportune,<sup>16</sup> although any day—morning and evening (as if twilight were the time when the *nāgas* are most attentive)—finds worshippers at the outdoor tree-shrines. Both men and women will be found there, but the men are usually there because they have accompanied a wife, daughter, mother, or sister to the place. Twice a year more people than at other times gather at the *nāgakkals*. The pattern of worship then does not differ markedly from what already has been described—only the quantity of worshippers who gather to do it increases. The first date falls in the half of the year known as "*Dakṣiṇāyana*," generally considered to be inauspicious. The celebration is on the fifth (*pañcamī*-) day of the waxing half of the month known as *Śrāvaṇa* (July-August), hence the name "*Nāgapañcamī*." The second date falls in the other, auspicious half of the year known as "*Uttarāyana*." That holiday is called "*Nāgacaturthī*," its name deriving from the fact that it is observed on the fourth (*catur*-) day of the waxing half of the month, specifically, during *Āśvina* (September-October). In a symbolic sense the entire year, in its disparate polar aspects, is represented in the celebrations, then, and is presumably blessed by the forces which are placated. In the South the two dates, which are not in fact very far apart, correspond to periods respectively when rains are prevalent and snakes are driven from their holes, perhaps to threaten human habitations, and when harvests are imminent and snakes may be encountered in the field and inadvertently injured, an act which in turn might incur their wrath. The relationships

of these two days holy to the *nāgas* seem to point to continuing concerns to seek blessings, to evoke fertility, and to placate hostile influences.

Our line-drawing of typical *nāgakkals* shows many of the details already alluded to—the ground-markings which designate the area as sacred space, the small votive lamps, the stone slabs with snake designs, the tree trunk, markings daubed on both stones and trunk, etc. Surrounding the base of the tree, and enclosing the *nāga*-stones, is a basement. This is usually constructed of bricks or stones, and is invariably painted with red and white stripes—a peculiarity found most pronounced in Tamil Nadu and the significance for doing which is not entirely clear.<sup>17</sup> More striking to the eye are the stone slabs themselves, carved with serpentine designs. Cobra-like snakes, with one or three or five hoods, represent the *nāgas*. The delineation of the *nāga*-forms tapers from the spreading hood to the tail coiled underneath it. Within the hood's expanse is where the vermilion powder is smudged, evidently the spot where devotion dictates sacrifice is proper to do. Here sometimes is nothing notable at all (observe the first and second stones in the line-drawing, starting from the left); sometimes one sees a *Śiva-linga* [q.v.] (*vide* the third and fifth stones); or quite often there appears a dancing Kṛṣṇa (? see the fourth stone from the left). Does this mean the powder is smeared to appease the *nāga*-spirits, or to praise Śiva and/or Kṛṣṇa?

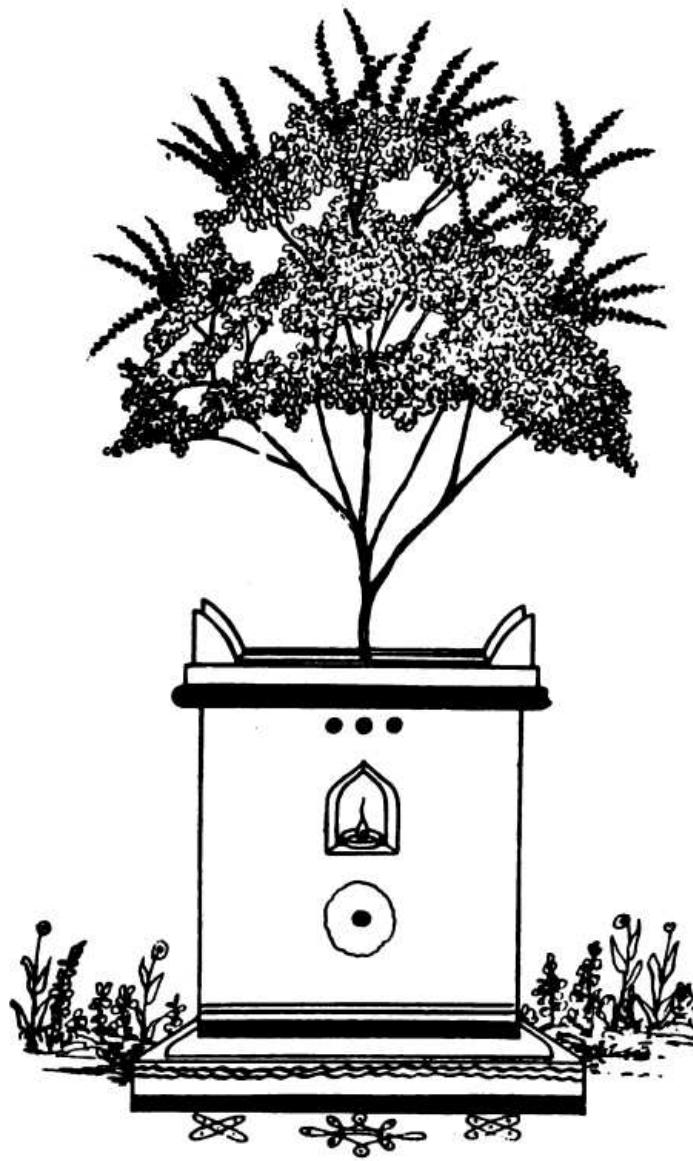
One answer to the question would be to say that the offerings are to both, and to all. For, after all, the worship is of power however manifested or recognized. Another answer would be to say that the offerings are to neither, or to none specifically, since the *nāga*-shapes are obviously not intended to be representational portraits. They are symbols. And, as symbols, they represent the entirety of creation—the hood representing the plenitude of infinite existence, the expanse of the divine presence permeating the higher regions, while the tail, a continuation of the upper portion, tapering down to but a fraction of the hood's breadth, represents the created order of the visible world. Somewhere in between the two extremes, sometimes visible,

sometimes not, is the place where divinity dwells, at a juncture man can reach out and touch, where worship may be done. That other interpretations are possible is by no means ruled out, given the nature of the symbols before us in the line-drawing.

There is at least one temple in south India dedicated to serpent worship. That temple is both famous and ancient. It is the large Nāgarāja Temple in the town of Nagercoil, located just above the tip of the peninsula. It seems to have been famous even in the fifth-sixth centuries C.E., as it is referred to by India's premier poet, Kālidāsa.

The association of certain deities with *nāgas* must be commented upon briefly. That the ancient *nāga*-cult has been absorbed into the pantheon of Hindu gods in different ways merely witnesses to the passing of one cult into obscurity, the succeeding prominence of another, later one. Kṛṣṇa dancing on the hoods of the *nāga*-king, Viṣṇu recumbent on his serpent couch, Śiva wearing snakes as a necklace and armbands, Gaṇapati using a serpent as a girdle, Māriyamman wearing on cobra-hooded crown as nimbus, even the feathered *vāhanas* of Viṣṇu and Murugaṇ (= Subrahmanya = Kumāra) who hold them at bay—all these are examples of how the *nāga*-cult concentrates at varying intensities in the Hindu mind all the while that the popular *nāgakkals* continue to attract votaries directly to the quintessential shapes themselves.

The worship of the *nāgas* attracts Hindus from all walks of life. It is not caste-specific in its clientele. Votaries include the highly educated as well as the illiterate. Devotees of Śiva as well as of Viṣṇu and other Hindu deities join ranks to wait upon the tree-shrines. So it is that one finds names throughout the South suggesting the pervasive reverence for the *nāgas* as, among others, powers to reckon. Boys are given such names as: Nāgeśvara, Nāganātha, Nāgarāja, Nāgaswamy, Nāgendra, Nāgappa and Nāgayya as well as Ananta and Śeṣa (and their variants). Girls are given such names as: Nāgammā, Nāgamaṇi, Nāgeśvari, Nāginī and Nāgambikā as well Anantammā, Śeṣammā, etc.

**Fig.35. Tulasi Plant**

Traces of the outdoor cult are also found indoors, where the snake spirits have insinuated their presences into the *pūjā*-routines at home shrines. Thus, domestic worship often features small serpentine shapes made of silver. These diminutive versions of the *nāgas* are usually kept with other household images in a sanctified cupboard or shrine otherwise set apart. There, regularly, as part of the daily orisons after the *iṣṭadevatā* has been honored, the male worshipper in the family takes up the *nāga*-image, cleanses it with water, then with (cow's) milk, and afterward offers fragrant powders and flowers to it. The maintenance of such worship, in addition to whatever rewards accrue for regularly worshipping the household deity, is believed to bring safety to the home, to ward off evil, to insure potency and to beget children.

So, worship of the *nāgas* is a very important element of Hinduism today throughout the South. While the cult is both archaic and primitive it is also very contemporary and compelling. Just as many intelligent Hindus feel, so must also a student of Indology be warned, it is at one's peril to ignore the presence and power of the *nāgas*.

## 35

### Tulasī (The Sacred Basil Plant)

Once upon a time, according to Hindu legend, there was a lady named Bṛndā. She was a very noble and sincere woman, as ardent in her faith to the Lord Viṣṇu as she was devoted to the welfare of her husband. Out of her love for god, she undertook fasts and vigils, she prayed and she sang sacred hymns; and out of love for Jalandhara, her husband, the merit which she acquired from all her pious acts, she gave to him. Over the years, because of the mounting merit her many good deeds brought to him, the husband, Jalandhara, grew very powerful. In fact, the power he accumulated from her purity made him invincible—safe from problems posed by other men, from dangers devised by demons, even from the guiding grip of all the gods. At this, the heavenly hosts became



apprehensive, for they were powerless over Jalandhara as he began to misdirect his power to evil ends. Still Bṛndā continued her spiritual austerities; the more she persisted in her acts of piety the more merit she transferred to her beloved, but increasingly reckless, husband.

Sensing that the situation was growing grave, the gods approached Viṣṇu to seek his intervention. At the request of the other gods, Viṣṇu agreed to descend to earth in the guise of Bṛndā's husband—the very one for whose benefit she exercised such self-abnegation. Coming to her at night, the Lord Viṣṇu, looking ever so much like her husband, persuaded Bṛndā to resume sexual relations (as a husband may be expected from time to time to demand). Since she was devoted to her husband she complied. But because in fact her conjugal partner was *not* her husband but someone else, by that act she immediately lost all the merit she had acquired by her previous piety. Thereupon, in the twinkling of an eye, her husband, Jalandhara, was reduced to his former, normal status. In punishment for his presumption, the gods asked Śiva to act as representative and, on their behalf, to cut off Jalandhara's head. Only then did Bṛndā realize her plight. Seeing her dead husband before her, she waited until his funeral pyre had been lit and, when it burned very brightly, she mounted onto it and, as he was cremated, she also burned herself to death. By this act she dramatized once and for all her innocence; she demonstrated before all the world her fidelity to her beloved husband; she witnessed to the truth that she had not knowingly ever committed a sin.

Once the terrible fire had spent itself and the embers had cooled, there arose from the ashes of Bṛndā the green and fragrant *tulasī* (sacred basil) plant. It is believed that upon her death Bṛndā ascended to heaven where she now sits enthroned next to the Supreme God Viṣṇu. For, all the while quite unconscious of her own identity, Bṛndā had been none other than Lakṣmī [q.v.]. When she returned to the celestial realm she resumed her rightful place beside her eternal consort Viṣṇu, He Whom she had ever adored even as an earthly devotee.

With purāṇic legends such as the preceding one occupying their thoughts,<sup>18</sup> or perhaps as they intone similar stories preserved in song, the ladies of countless Hindu households approach the *tulasī*, or sacred basil, plant. And the *tulasī*-plant will be found growing somewhere on the premises. Sometimes it is cultivated in a modest, clay flowerpot. More often it finds a place in the back garden or central courtyard, where it is tended in an upright cement stand called a "*Bṛndāvana*" (Fig. 35). Such a stationary platform is so widely used in Hindu devotional worship that it has become an idiom of Indian domestic architecture, as automatically supplied by contractors building a house as garden walls, well platforms, and roof terraces. The name of the stand means, literally, "the garden of Bṛndā," and refers to the place over Bṛndā's ashes where the sacred stalk first sprouted.

The worship of the *tulasī*-plant is exclusively a woman's occupation. It seems not to be done much in the South in homes of the lower communities, but day in and day out it is a regular feature of other Hindu households regardless of wealth, education, or *sampradāya*. Among Hindu women who are most obviously attached to the daily domestic worship of the *tulasī*-plant are followers of Madhva [q.v.]. Śrī-aiṣṇava and Smārta women also make worship of the *tulasī*-plant part of their devotional routines.

The rites are themselves disarmingly simple. Soon after a lady rises, bathes and changes into clean clothes, she will move toward the "*Bṛndāvana*"-stand (or flowerpot, as the case may be). Dawn may just be coloring the eastern horizon. The first thing done is to rinse off the stand in order to cleanse from it traces of previous matins. Then it is freshly adorned with auspicious marks, using scarlet powders and white paste. Thereupon the plant is duly watered, and lamps are lit in the niches in each of the four sides of the stand. If available, some buds or blooms of suitable flowers are placed at the base of the stand, or even in the branches of the *tulasī*-plant itself. The brief duties culminate with circumambulations of the

stand. These are done in the orthoprax clockwise fashion [*pradakṣiṇā*] three, nine, eighteen or more times. While doing these the votary keeps uppermost in her mind the paradigm of Bṛndā, whose steadfast devotion made possible in the first place the plant now honored—so she meditates on the merit which accrues from pious deeds undertaken in faith; on those loved ones to whom such merit may be transferred; on the virtues of constancy to one's husband, of dedication to the welfare of one's family, and of faithfulness to god; and on the constant vigilance required to avoid sinning, even in innocence. If able, she articulates her hopes by singing a folk-song drawn from the vast repertoire handed down from mother to daughter; otherwise she concentrates on some traditional utterance [*vacana/stotra*] which reiterates the complex of aspirations to which she rises; or, because the verdant *tulasī*-plant has ancient associations also with the gifted goddess Lakṣmī [*q.v.*], she may review that deity's "108" names. When finished, she kneels before the plant, her forehead touching the ground, then withdraws. What is done in the morning is usually repeated around sunset. Each cycle requires less than five minutes' time.

There are no doubt mystic levels sounded by this ancient litany. The vibrations affected are most clearly associated with ancient tree worship, with reverence for the power and revivifying potential of all plants, with psychic stirrings which long for inviolable constancy and permanent beatitude. But at the surface the aims seem simply to be the health and well-being of one's family.

In one of the many canticles addressed to the plant at home its stand, the *Bṛndāvana*, is eulogized as the central, wondrous locus where converge all sacred rivers, all holy spots, all divine presences. The obverse of this is also worth considering. For, it is not merely speaking figuratively that one may say that the sacred *tulasī*-plant branches out from its original post in the domestic *Bṛndāvana* to ramify at many different locations within the extensive Hindu cultus. Everything about the plant has, through the course of time, taken on something of the

numinous—even the soil it grows in, as well as its leaves, twigs, flowers, seeds and roots, are holy. For example, it has powerful protective capacities. Even mud from its base, when smeared on the forehead, is potent enough to ward off Yama, the grim god of death. Its leaves, when crushed, make a potion “good for the blood”; when applied to the skin, eruptions will subside. The very breeze which wafts through its branches is believed to have antiseptic effects. The cultivation of a *tulasī*-plant can atone for the most grievous sins; but even to see a *tulasī*-plant is said to remit certain sins.

The *tulasī*-plant is almost a prerequisite for worship at home and at the temple. The fragrant *tulasī*-leaves are known to be pleasant offerings to Viṣṇu in all his forms, but most especially to his incarnations as Kṛṣṇa [q.v.] and Rāma [q.v.]. So, images of both Kṛṣṇa and Rāma—deities so widely found throughout the length and breadth of India in temples and at home shrines—are particularly honored by advancing them garlands of *tulasī*-leaves. In the libations offered to Vaiṣṇava deities, whether at temple or home-shrine, a few sprigs of *tulasī*-leaves are placed in the sanctified water and, when received by the devotee as *tīrtha-prasāda*, are believed to be the Very Presence of the Lord! Part of the sprig received then may be gratefully nibbled for internal and spiritual health, the remainder of the sprig is placed over the right ear for external and mundane protection. The leaves are used not only in the cycles of daily worship; they are occasionally used in special liturgies at temples to honor the gods, and the annual *śrāddha*-rites in homes to commemorate departed ancestors. Acts of charity [*dāna*] are always confirmed by the presence of a spray or a blossom of the plant; a gift, no matter how modest, is immeasurably enhanced in value when accompanied even by one lowly leaf.<sup>19</sup> Dead plants, too, have their use—the woody stalks and roots of dried *tulasī*-plants are cut off and fashioned into beads to put in “rosaries” for repeating the divine names. Gardens attached to temples often feature cultivation of *tulasī*-plants, since the leaves are needed for liturgical purposes there.

Some days of special importance to domestic *tulasī*-worship should be mentioned. As with placation of the *nāgas* [q.v.], so also in this are Tuesdays and Fridays especially important. And, once a year, on the twelfth day of the waxing phase of the lunar month known as *Kārttika* (October-November), the marriage of the goddess *Tulasī* to the Lord *Viṣṇu* is commemorated. Normally this is done on a quite modest scale, sprigs of *tulasī*- and other leaves serving as substitute presences of the divinities. Songs drawn from an inherited repertoire are sung in the vernacular by the ladies of the house that evening, and those ballads serve to accentuate for those who listen the sacred story recapitulated that day. Sometimes the commemoration is done on a much grander scale, and special priests are called into the home to chant the *mantras* in Sanskrit appropriate to the occasion.

In closing, it need come as no surprise that the name *Bṛndā* is one used for girls in many Hindu homes. The feminine personification of the plant is also used as girl's name—*Tulasī*. The most famous name for a man which derives from this sacred plant is, of course, *Tulasīdāsa* ("servant, or devotee, of the *tulasī*-plant, i.e., of God")—and has been immortalized by the great Hindi poet *Tulsīdās*. It may come as a surprise to Westerners, however, to note that Hindus do not cook the leaves of the basil plant, nor do they use the fragrant leaves as a condiment or mere flavoring for food. Herbs and aromatic leaves, roots, seeds, and shoots are all utilized widely in Indian cooking, to be sure; but to the orthodox Hindu the *tulasī*-plant is more than the sum of its parts. It is a sacred presence and must be treated as such.

*Note:* in Śaiva piety an analogous rank is given to the *Bilva* tree compared to what is accorded the *Tulasī*-plant in Vaiṣṇava piety. Offerings of leaves from the *Bilva* (or *Vilva*, by some simply called *Bel*, and known botanically as *Aegle Marmelos*, or "wood apple") are an essential in Śaiva worship. Its leaf contains three fronds, which may be indicative of its association with Śiva, the correspondence being made to his three functions. Its ripe, red fruit is savored by all. Its green, unripe fruit is sometimes used medicinally.

The worship of trees, as such, has not been taken up in this volume. See, however, essay on *Māriyamman*, and on the *nāgas* and their worship.

## NOTES TO SECTION FIVE

1. Not all Aiyāṇār shrines are so rustic: some boast several structures, and maintain one or more full-time priests who officially open and close the precincts daily as well as receive votaries on regular and special occasions. Those more sophisticated centers provide observers with informants and stories the data of which are often at variance with what is obtained in the more rural settings. There is fashionable among scholars studying south Indian cults a disposition to identify the worship of Aiyāṇār with the cult of another indigenous male deity of the South, Ayyappaṇ [q.v.]. This raises a very complicated set of issues, both in terms of collecting information and interpreting it. We treat these two popular gods, as do their respective devotees, as discrete and separate cult-deities.
2. In his deployment of the hair, at least, he bears interesting resemblances to Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti.
3. A similar process of Sanskritization is to be noted in the case of Ayyappaṇ [q.v.] who, *mirabili dictu*, is given the same parentage, for which reason one of his epithets is "Hariharaputra."
4. It is not just his caste status and dietary habits which distance him from the retinue of images honored outside his cell. There are other differences as well: they are black, he is white; they are subjects, he is sovereign; they are lone warriors, he has consorts; they are "outside," he is "inside"; their servitors approach them in trance, he and his attendants remain collected—to cite a few.
5. Sanskrit texts seem to identify him thus as Śāstā, "ruler" (Tamil: *Cāṇā*).
6. It may be more than that, too. Elephants are the mounts of royalty, so this only serves to reinforce Aiyāṇār's role as "ruler" (*Śāstā/Cāṇā*). And, recall, elephants are mighty symbols for clouds and the rain they bring; it is not too far-fetched, perhaps, to draw analogies between the elephant-borne Aiyāṇār and the elephant-riding Indra as harbingers of rain.
7. A very complicated set of issues arises in relation to Ayyappaṇ's identity with another popular, south Indian folk deity, Aiyāṇār [q.v.]. There are those who see the two divines as, in fact, but one. This amalgamation of the two popular gods is hotly contested by the priests of the respective cults. We treat the two here as discrete and separate cult deities.
8. In recent years the prohibition seems to have been breached, as women have been observed making the pilgrimage to Śabarimala alongside men. The tradition is in flux at this writing; within the decade it is possible all vestiges of the prohibition will have vanished. However, that the *Makara Jyoti*—a mysterious light which is said to emanate from the northeast horizon toward the climax of the winter pilgrimage each year—failed to glow in 1979 was at the time attributed to the polluting presence of women!
9. The number 18 is, of course, said to be replete with symbolism, many pilgrims equating the steps with the sum of the five *indriyas*, 9 *rāgas*, 3 *guṇas*, plus *yidyā*



or *avidyā*, all 18 of which must be utilized in every aspect of life, including the devout life. Others say the 18 steps recall, for purposes of meditation on his power, each one of the Lord's 18 weapons—or, recall the 18 chapters of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the 18 *purāṇas*, the 18-day battle of the *Mahābhārata* war! We do not pause here to probe the "meaning" more deeply, except to note that it seems clear that the symbolism of the 18 steps remains a mystery to most of those who traverse their ascent to the summit.

10. Obviously this description pertains to the *pūjārī*'s social origins rather than to his religious commitment, for it is difficult to imagine an orthodox Muslim who would be willing to serve in a Hindu temple and thus incur the sin of idolatry, and very likely of apostasy as well!
11. Elsewhere, in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, this attractive and youthful god so popular in Tamil Nadu as Murugaṇ is known primarily as Subrahmanya, secondarily by associated Sanskrit names. Outside of Tamil Nadu he is to a much greater extent related to the Śaiva pantheon. It is possible in our limited scope here to do no more than to sample one manifestation of this vigorous god's presence in south India.
12. Images of babies are perennial favorites in India's sentimental illustration industry. In the ubiquitous framing pictures, calendar illustrations, and decals made for automobile windows it is not unusual to see Kṛṣṇa, Hanumān, Gaṇeśa, Murugaṇ (and/or Subrahmanya) and even Śiva depicted as infants. These also serve as significant indicators of popular piety.
13. It is little wonder, then, that when Murugaṇ is depicted aniconographically, the object chosen to represent the essence of his being is his *vēl*, or spear. So it is, accordingly, at countless shrines one sees only the *vēl* rising from the ground, a quite powerful enough symbol to evoke a sense of Murugaṇ's full presence.
14. The peacock as a symbol for *māyā* has been touched upon elsewhere in this volume in relation to Sarasvatī [q.v.]. It might be noted here in passing that a peacock feather is quite regularly an item decorating the figure of Kṛṣṇa, for which, see line-drawings of Bālakṛṣṇa, Veṅugopāla, and Kṛṣṇa with Rukmiṇī and Satyabhāmā, *supra*.
15. *Nāga*-shrines are almost always found in Māriammaṇ temples, and usually in temples dedicated to Śiva as well as in those of the Murugaṇ cult. For reasons not entirely clear, they are less frequently encountered in Viṣṇu temples of the South.
16. In urban Madras' inner city it is not unusual to see ladies lined in queues on those mornings, waiting their turns to placate the powers at the neighborhood *nāgakkal*.
17. These same stripes are found on the walls of temples, leading to all levels of esoteric interpretation—red represents *rajoguṇa*, white represents *sattvagūṇa*; red is "hot," an uncontrolled color, while white is a "cool" and contained color, the two in conjunction communicating balance and equanimity; *etc.* But police stations bear the same stripes, as do curbstones where "No Parking" is the rule!
18. The *Padma-purāṇa* (*Uttara-khaṇḍa*) and the *Vāyu-purāṇa* both recount how the sacred *tulasī*-plant made its first appearance at the time of the churning of the Milky Ocean



when it, and other treasures of great worth, were raised from the depths. The *Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa* II.xxi.33 *et seq.* states that the plant was produced from the hair of the goddess Tulasī. See also *Padma-purāṇa* VI: chs. 98-107; cf. *Śiva-purāṇa* V: xiv-xxvi, xli and *Devibhāgavata-purāṇa* IX.

19. The passage [IX : 26] of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, when Krishna says: "Patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyam, yo me bhaktyā prayacchati tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛtam aśnāmi prayatāṁsanam" is often construed to refer to the sacred basil [*tulasī*] leaf.



## **Appendix**

### ***Hymns of Adoration***

All the figures treated in this volume enjoy cult status. As part of their veneration, devotees of these figures regularly address to them hymns of praise and petition. What follows is a selection of some of the better-known compositions. They are drawn from Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada sources. When used in a worship setting in those respective traditions, these canticles are either chanted or sung from loving memory.

None of the selections here can ever be translated adequately, for it is virtually impossible to capture in another language the richness and associational nuance conveyed by the hymns in their original form so long held in the heart of a worshipper, words that both sum and summon up so much of what compels the follower to turn to that figure in the first place. At best, it is hoped, these free renderings into English words will serve to convey a suggestion of the *bhakti*-spirit which initially inspired their authors, and which has continued to prompt those who have echoed the same sentiments through the centuries.

**To Gaṇapati****[Fig. 1]**[from a traditional Sanskrit *stotra*]

I always turn my heart's thought to  
 The elephant-faced Lord with a single tusk,  
 Who is a veritable sun for the lotus face of Pārvatī (his mother),  
 And who showers many a boon on his devotees.

**To Nāṭarāja****[Fig. 4]**

[Tirunālvukkarasar, 7th cent. C.E.]

Eye brows bent (like a bow), enchanting smile on lips  
     red as the "kovai" [*bimba*] fruit,  
 Damp tresses, the body once red, now smeared with white  
     ashes as light as milk,  
 One golden (=beautiful) foot gracefully lifted,  
 That form if one is blessed to see,  
 Certainly makes man's birth worthwhile on this earth.

**To Pārvatī****[Fig. 6]**[from a traditional Sanskrit *stotra*]

O Thou, Who art the very incarnation of all charms,  
 O Auspicious Lady, Thou Who dost bestow all boons,  
 I bow down to Thee. O Wife of the Lord with the Eye of Fire,  
 O Sister of Him who sleeps on the sea, I prostrate myself to Thee.

**To Māṇikkavācakar****[Fig. 7]**

[from. . . .]

O Māṇikkavācakar! thou art the ambrosia of the inner soul.  
 O Mahāyogin! thou art the form of bliss divine.  
 Bless me to enjoy the Veda in Tamil  
 That thou gavest by thy spotless grace!

**To Śaṅkara****[Fig. 8]**

[from a traditional Sanskrit utterance]

Trustee of truths from timeless texts,  
 Custodian of compassion sweet:  
 I bow and bless that fulsome name  
 That fills the world with blessings meet.

**To Rāmalīṅga****[Fig. 9]**

[from one of Rāmalīṅga's own compositions in Tamil]

I begged the Lord for a frame never to be destroyed  
 By wind, earth, space, fire, water, or Yama,  
 Or by diseases, weapons, planets, or acts which  
     add on to the cycle of births—  
 And with all this the Lord blessed me.  
 O men of the world! feel no disgrace. Accept what I say:  
 Join my Father Effulgent, the Great Lord of Mercy!

**To Hanumān****[Fig. 11]**[from a traditional Sanskrit *stotra*]

I prostrate before Hanumān, the son of Wind-god, who with body  
 Resembling a mountain is an abode of immeasurable strength,  
 A repository of all virtues, best among the wisest,  
 Master of the monkeys, and a great devotee of Rāma.

**To Bālakṛṣṇa****[Fig. 12]**

[from a traditional Telugu verse]

A lump of butter in your hand,  
 A garland of flowers 'round your neck,  
 A golden thread fits 'round your waist,  
 Little Kṛṣṇa we commune with you in worship.

**To Veṅugopāla****[Fig. 13]**

[from a Sanskrit *stotra* composed by  
 Madhusūdhana Sarasvatī, 17th cent. C.E.]

I recognize no reality beyond Kṛṣṇa—how beauteous the hand that  
 holds  
 The flute, He Who, dusky as the newly formed cloud, shines  
 In silken garments, has a lower lip bright as a *bimba*-gourd, a face  
 as comely  
 As the moon in full radiance, and eyes large as lustrous lotuses!

**To Guruvāyūrappan****[Fig. 16]**

[from a traditional Malayalam hymn]

Let me deck your hands and feet with bands of gold!  
 Let me raise my hands together  
 In prayer to you, O Lord with oblong eyes like lotus petals!  
 Let me even herd your charges, and send them contentedly into  
 the field.  
 You are the true god who, truly, can be grasped! I herewith lift  
 up my hands to you and you alone—my dearest one!

**To Raṅganātha****[Fig. 17]**[from a Sanskrit *stotra* composed by Parāśara Bhaṭṭa, 11th cent. C.E.]

Śrī's breasts reflect the radiance of His lustrous glow.  
 Śrīraṅgam glories as His couch, to where I go,  
 There to surrender to that sapphire bright,  
 That One reposing on His snake of might.

**To Venkaṭeśvara****[Fig. 19]**[from the *Śrivenkaṭeśvara Suprabhātam*]

Apart from Venkaṭeśa I have no master, no master.  
 I remember, always I remember Venkaṭeśa.  
 O Venkaṭeśa, be gracious, be gracious!  
 O Venkaṭeśa, bless me, O do bless me with what I wish!



**To Nammālvār****[Fig. 20]**[a Sanskrit *stotra* composed by Yāmunicārya, 10th cent. C.E.]

Far more e'en than parents, or dear ones, or children,  
 Beyond wealth and riches, things held in high store,  
 The Feet of the First One, our teacher, our master,  
 All decked in *vakula*, those Feet I adore.

**To Rāmānuja****[Fig. 21]**[a *stotra* in Sanskrit composed by Kurattālvār, 11th cent. C.E.]

Just as for Viṣṇu's Lotus Feet his passion knew no bounds,  
 Insensate e'en to blades of grass, he all the world astounds,  
 So I to him so steeped in love, to him my guru sweet,  
 Betake my heart, bow down to him, and bless his holy feet.

**To Rāghavendra****[Fig. 23]**

[from a well-known, traditional song]

My homage to the adorable Rāghavendra  
 Who was always devoted to truth and virtue,  
 Who was a desire-yielding *kalpa*-tree  
 And boon-bestowing *kāmadhenu*-cow to all those  
 Who bow down to him reverentially.

**To Lakṣmī****[Fig. 27]**[from Śaṅkara's *Kanakadhāra*stotra]

O lovely one with oblong eyes like lotus petals,  
 O bearer of blooms in both hands,  
 O thou so splendid, draped in shining white *sārī*,  
 O thou wreathed in fragrant garlands,  
 O thou held dear even by Lord Hari himself,  
 O lady so liberal, bountiful to the three *bhuvana*-worlds:  
 Be gracious unto me!

**To Sarasvatī****[Fig. 30]**

[traditional Sanskrit verse]

O Lady whose presence pervades all things,  
 let me pay homage to you.  
 So generous are you, appearing to the discerning  
 in any guise you choose.  
 I am about to undertake a course leading  
 to new wisdom and learning:  
 Let it so be that success may crown  
 my every effort.

**To Ayyappaṇ****[Fig. 32]**

[a well-known Malayali devotional song]

I seek refuge in Ayyappaṇ. O Lord Ayyappaṇ, I seek refuge in You!  
 I seek refuge in Ayyappaṇ. O Lord Ayyappaṇ, I seek refuge in You!  
 You are my refuge, O Father, my dearest One, my dearest Ayyappaṇ!  
 O Lord, O dearest One, I seek refuge in You! O Ayyappaṇ!  
 You are my refuge, my dearest Ayyappaṇ!

**To Murugaṇ****[Fig. 33]**

[from a traditional Tamil verse]

O Lord Muruka, ruler on Senthil,  
 Son-in-law of Viṣṇu, son of Śiva,  
 And brother of Gaṇeśa,  
 In faith I worship your feet with golden anklets.

**To the Sacred Basil Plant****[Fig. 35]**

[from a traditional Sanskrit verse]

O Tulasī, resembling Lakṣmī; one who absolves sins of devotees  
 and confers merits on them!  
 One eulogized by Nārada, and one beloved by Nārāyaṇa,  
 I bow down before you!

## Glossary

Most unfamiliar words are identified or otherwise explicated when they are used in the preceding essays. The list that follows expands on some words used freely in the essays and not explained sufficiently where they occurred.

Bold-face type is used whenever a term is a major "Glossary" entry; this is intended to encourage cross-referencing.

See "Index" for additional matters.

**Ālvār(s)** - a group of twelve Tamil poet-saints who flourished between the 7th-9th cent. C.E. (some say as early as the 3rd cent.) and whose preserved utterances [*vacana(s)*] reflect their personal experiences of Viṣṇu in one or another of his *avatāra(s)* or image-forms. The twelve represented several social sectors, and included both women and men, high-born and low. The "4000" devotional stanzas attributed to the twelve were collected together by the 10th century, and those verses have since served as standard hymns in Tamil *Vaiṣṇava* worship, both public and private. Images of the Ālvārs are often found in Tamil *Vaiṣṇava* temples, where they are duly worshipped. Cf. *Nāyanmār(s)*, below.

***Amānta*** - a system of reckoning lunar months to begin with the New Moon [*Amāvāsyā*] and with the "bright," or waxing, fortnight; prevalent in large tracts of south India following luni-solar calendars, but does not apply to those (e.g., Tamilians, Malayalis) following a solar calendar. Cf. *Pūrṇimānta*, below.

**Amāvāsyā** - refers to the night of the New Moon, the morning following which is reckoned by most Kannada and some Telugu peoples and many others in south India (Tamilians excepted) as the first day of a new month. For them, the fortnight which follows *Amāvāsyā* is the "bright," or waxing, and auspicious half of the month when festivals and celebrations are most rewarding. That first day is considered by the orthoprax to be the most opportune time to honor one's departed ancestors [*pitr(s)*]. Indeed, in some places the morning after the night of a New Moon is regularly observed as an official "half-holiday" in order that government servants and others may have those morning hours free to attend to their *tarpaṇa* - rites. That same day is also widely considered to be an appropriate time to worship the goddess. Cf. *Purnamī/Pūrṇimā*, below.

**aniconic** - "not" [*an-*] iconic, that is, *not* having a conventionalized human or animal shape as in an image form of a Hindu god, goddess or one of their various companions; instead, taking the shape of some intentionally symbolic design (such as a *yantra* or a *maṇḍala*), or a combination of alphabetical letters, or an object "found" in some natural, perhaps suggestive, shape (such as a tree, a *śālagrāma*, a *liṅga*, etc.)—to any or all of which is ascribed divine power.

**artha** - "aim," "wealth," "material possessions," "political power," "this-worldly comforts"—collectively, the accumulation of which constitutes one of the four, legitimate goals to which a Hindu may aspire, is expected to gain. See also *dharma*, *kāma*, *mokṣa*, and *puruṣārtha(s)*, below.

**Āṣāḍha** - Sanskrit name for the the Indic *amānta* month which initiates the inauspicious half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of June through mid-July (according to Tamil solar reckoning this is *Āṇi*-month; for

Malayalis, *Midunam*-month). Sundays in this month are held to be especially rewarding for those who worship Māriyamman.

**Āśvina** - Sanskrit name for one of the six Indic *amānta* months which falls during the inauspicious half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*], a period corresponding roughly to late September through the first half of October (according to Tamil solar reckoning this is *Puraṭṭāci*-month; for Malayalis, *Kannī*). During the “dark” fortnight when *Āśvina*’s moon wanes the nine-night “*Navarātri*” festival is celebrated honoring Sarasvatī, Durgā and various other goddesses. Upon completion of “*Navarātri*,” on the “tenth” night [*daśamī*], are also widely celebrated the powers of certain trees and tools, time-tested *kṣatriya*-values and also, by some, the Hindu god Rāma’s ultimate sway over demoniac forces [*Vijaya-daśamī*]. At the end of the month, and continuing into *Kārttika*-month (Oct-Nov), is another cluster of festivals culminating with *Dīwālī*, or *Dīpāvalī*, a “festival of lights” honoring Lakṣmī, among others. For some groups in south India the New Year commences just following this (see *Kārttika*, below; cf. also *Caitra*, below).

**B.C.E.** - “before the Common Era,” which is, in other words, what is often referred to as “B.C.” by Christians, meaning historical time measured “before Christ.” In a pluralistic world, “B.C.E.” seems to many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, a less parochial designation than “B.C.”

**Bālāji** - epithet for the lord Venkaṭeśvara; probably an affectionate diminutive [-*jī*] added to the term of familiarity, “child” [*bāla*]. Also according to some legends, it is the name of a devotee with whom the Lord used to play the game of chess/dice every night.

**Bhādrapada** - Sanskrit name for one of the six Indic *amānta* months during the inauspicious half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*] bridging the latter part of August through mid-September (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this is *Āvaṇi*-month; for Malayalis, *Cirgam*). It is during

*Bhādrapada*-month—on the 4th day of the waxing fortnight—that Gaṇeśa's birthday, *Gaṇeśacaturthī*, is commemorated. This is also the season when, on the eighth night of the "dark" fortnight, the midnight birth of the beloved god-child Kṛṣṇa is marked by the holiday called *Janmāṣṭamī* or *Śrī Jayantī*. It is during this time of year also that a spectacular 10-day *Brahmotsava* at Tirupati is celebrated.

*bhakta(s)* / *bhakti* - devotee(s), or ardent worshipper(s) of god/ devotion, or faithful worship of god. Both terms imply love, that is to say, human devotion to the Divine Being reciprocated by divine concern for the human being, which leads to a condition of union, completion, and perfection, consequently to unending peace, bliss and beatitude. *Bhakti*-devotion may be directed to Śiva, to Viṣṇu, to the goddess or to any one of their forms.

*bilva* - the "wood apple" tree [*Aegle marmelos*]. All its parts are sacred to Śiva, especially its leaves which are used to decorate Śiva images and shrines, and which are ascribed as having supernatural powers. According to the *Śrīsūkta*, this tree is also associated with Lakṣmī. Cf. *Tulasī*-plant sacred to Viṣṇu in essay #35.

*brahmacārin(s)* - term used to describe young, orthoprax Hindu male(s) who, prior to marriage, observe(s) celibacy while pursuing traditional studies as part of the rigors of the first significant period [*āśrama*] of Hindu life; that period is itself referred to as the "stage" (or period) of *brahmacarya*.

*brāhmaṇa(s)* - in English usage, Brahmin(s); member(s) of the sacerdotal (priestly) division of traditional Hindu society, ideally ascribed to be the first of the four-fold social order comprised of *brāhmaṇa(s)*, *kṣatriya(s)*, *vaiśya(s)*, *śūdra(s)*. Generally speaking, Brahmins have traditionally set and enforced the norms for religious life and social behavior and appear, at least, to be those nowadays with greatest residual concern for orthopraxy.



**Brahmin(s)** - see *brāhmaṇa(s)*, above.

**Brahmotsava(s)** - major temples mount one or more spectacular, 10-day festivals [*utsava(s)*] every year; the prefix denotes the lore that the god *Brahmā* originally established all such elaborated celebrations.

**Buddhism** - a religion that arose in India and for some centuries flourished there promulgating practices and doctrines at odds with established Vedic and Brahmanical norms; it thus earned for itself the antipathy of Brahmanical thinkers. Śāṅkara's scholasticism some centuries later provided arguments against the Buddhist positions, even though his system was itself inevitably nuanced by his opponents' ideology.

**C.E.** an abbreviation that stands for "Common Era" and is used as a substitute for what Christians usually refer to as "A.D." [*anno domini*, "in the year of our Lord"]. "C.E." seems to many in a pluralistic world—both Christians and non-Christians—to be a way of utilizing the Christian Gregorian calendar in a way that is less parochial than the still widely-favored "A.D."

**Caitra** - Sanskrit name for the Indic month which falls during the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyaṇa*], commencing for those following an *amānta* calendar reckoning on the day following the first New Moon preceding the vernal equinox. This month, then, usually spans a 30-day period roughly between late March and mid-April. As such, for many in the Telugu and Kannada speaking areas, it is the first month of a New Year. For Tamilians, however, who follow a system of solar reckoning, the commencement of *Cittirai*—the first month of the Tamil New Year—is whenever *meṣa-samkrānti* occurs, usually in mid-April; the Malayali New Year, *Viṣu*, starts on the day after the New Moon of the first full lunar cycle after the vernal equinox (and normally coincides with the commencement of the Tamil year; see below, under *Vaiśākha*). During nine days in the waxing half of this springtime

month of *Caitra* the birth and exploits of Lord Rāma, called "*Rāmanavami*," are widely commemorated. The full moon day of the month marks as well Hanumān's birth [*Hanumat-jayanti*]. In *devi*-temples throughout the South, also during this month, a 9-day *Vasanta-navarātri* celebrates the conquests of the Goddess. As well, impressive 10-day celebrations are held by *Śrī-vaiṣṇava*(s) at many sites in the South to honor Rāmānuja's birthday. So also at Tirupati is observed during *Caitra* one of the great 10-day *Brahmotsava*(s) for Lord Venkateśvara.

*Caturmāsa* - "four months" believed to be especially inauspicious, between the tenth of the "bright" fortnight of *Āṣāḍha* (June-July; according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is probably *Āṇi*; for Malayalis, *Midunam*) and the tenth of the "bright" fortnight of *Kārttika* (October-November; according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is probably *Aippaci*; for Malayalis, *Tuḷam*), a period in some regions of the sub-continent corresponding also to the rainy season when traveling could be risky. Better to stay at home and attend to spiritual exercises. Most temple festivities are suspended during this period, a time when the lord Viṣṇu is said to be "sleeping," hence all of creation is, as it were, in a state of suspended animation also. All *saṁnyāsins* observe this period as *cāturmāsya* during which they stay at one place and carry on their spiritual activities. See also under *Dakṣiṇāyana*, below.

*Cittirai* - see under *Vaiśākha*, below.

*Dakṣiṇāyana* - the inauspicious half of the year, more specifically, the six months from the Indic month *Āṣāḍha* (June-July; according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Āṇi*; for Malayalis, *Midunam*) to *Pauṣa* (December-January; according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Mārkaṭi*; for Malayalis, *Dhanu*), roughly between the summer solstice and the winter solstice, when the sun "travels southward" and nights get increasingly long. Generally speaking, this "dark" half of the year is a dangerous time, and it is popularly believed that one who dies

during any one of these six months takes the post-mortem pathway to the moon, eventually to be reborn. During *Dakṣiṇāyana* weddings are generally not celebrated; the last four months, called "*Caturmāsa*," when the lord Viṣṇu is said to be "sleeping," is a period often utilized by the pious for undertaking ascetic penances (vows, meditations, fasts, &c.). Cf. *Uttarāyana*, below.

*darśana* - the act of "seeing" God face-to-face, as it were, in the interchange of glance with gaze during the Hindu act of coming before the sacred image and lovingly beholding it (in turn, being regarded by it) by means of locking eyes with the figure. In *darśana* an exchange occurs, a transfusion of love, an intermingling of energy, which exchange is believed to be auspicious, salvific.

*deva(s)* / *devatā(s)* / *devī(s)* - terms used to refer to the myriad of divinities, both major and minor, in the Hindu pantheon. *Deva(s)* and *devatā(s)* are more or less interchangeable for male gods; *devī(s)* distinguishes goddesses from them. See also: *gṛha-devatā(s)*, *iṣṭa-devatā*, *kula-devatā*, below, all of which terms are to be distinguished from *kṣudra-devatā(s)* ("trifling gods") and *nīca-devatā(s)* ("low deities"), neither of which category grants *mokṣa*.

*dharma* - the ultimate law of all things, at the cosmic level, and, at the personal level, the individual course of right conduct in conformity with the ultimate sense of righteousness. In practical terms, the demands of *dharma* are made known through a host of *smṛti*-texts and through the peer-pressure of society's habits and hearsay. To see oneself flourishing while at the very same time sensing oneself contented, both guided and supported within an elaborate system of convention, is one of the four legitimate human aims [*puruṣārtha*, below]—along with *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.

*dhotī* - lower skirt-like garment worn by men in traditional India,

sometimes hung straight down from hips to ankles, sometimes draped between the legs, sometimes hiked up and fastened around the loins. Different styles of wearing *dhori*(s) are depicted in line-drawings #5, #10, #11, #13, #16 and #23. Cf. *sāṭī*, below.

*dhyāna-sloka*(s) - "meditation verse(s)" recited often because it/they recapitulate(s) the qualities or characteristics of a deity and assist(s) in the contemplation of that divine personality. Sometimes the verse(s) also serve(s) as guides to craftsmen when they wish to paint or sculpt images of divinities.

*Dvādaśī* - The "twelfth" day of each fortnight, when before daybreak orthoprax Hindus, especially women, terminate their *Ekādaśī* fast of the preceding day. Cf. *Ekādaśī*, below.

*Dvāpara Yuga* - the third of the four succeeding cosmic ages [*kṛta*, *trētā*, *dvāpara*, *kali*] when the Cow of Dharma no longer stands squarely on four feet but on two only, when the lifespan of a human is no longer the original 4000 years but only 2000, when righteousness is only half of what it was originally, and when the total span of the age is but half of the original period of 1,780,000 human years. Its characteristic color is yellow. It was toward the end of this *yuga*-age that Viṣṇu incarnated as Kṛṣṇa in order to quell the cruel kings like Kamsa, Śiśupāla and Naraka.

*Ekādaśī* - the "eleventh" day of each fortnight, when orthoprax Hindus, especially women, voluntarily undertake a fast and/or other *vrata*-vows in order to acquire merit [*puṇya*] for themselves or for loved ones. See *Dvādaśī*, above. To resort to the Raṅganātha Temple at Śrīraṅgam and to participate in the processions there on "*Vaikuṇṭha Ekādaśī*" Day in the "bright" fortnight of *Pauṣa* (December-January; according to Tamil solar reckoning this month is *Mārkaṭi*; for Malayalis, *Vṛścikam*)

is by *Śrī-aiṣṇava*(s) believed to yield especially potent results.

**Friday** [*Śukravāra*] - along with Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, this is considered to be a generally auspicious day. Named after the planet Venus (=Śukra), Friday is considered an especially opportune time to worship the goddesses, the Tulasi-plant and (on Tuesdays as well) the *nāga*(s) and/or Aiyānār. *Smārta*(s) who practice *pañcāyatana-pūjā* often reserve this day to honor the goddess. Friday's most auspicious period is during *Gulika-kāla* between 7:30 - 9 a.m.; its inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period is 10:30 a.m. - noon.

**Gāṇapatya**(s) - refers to those sectarian Hindus who worship Gaṇapati (= Gaṇeśa) as chief god.

**Garuḍa** - in Hindu lore, the *vāhana*-vehicle and companion of Viṣṇu; most often in the form of half man, half eagle.

**ghee** - *ghṛta*, a.k.a. *ghī*; clarified butter, used by Hindus both for food and as an esteemed religious offering.

**grāma-devatā**(s) - supernatural(s) which originally functioned as a guardian of fields surrounding a village, hence a protective presence for that settlement; normally of threatening visage and served by non-Brahmin priests. Temples and shrines to such are now found in towns and cities (perhaps taken there by emigrants from villages—see essay #31 for one type of *grāma-devatā* that is undergoing a process of transformation). In the setting of a domestic shrine, the householder will often honor an image of his *grāma-devatā* alongside images of his *grha-devatā* and his *iṣṭa-devatā*. The term is also used more generally to refer to any one of the thousands of "lesser" village gods recognized to varying degrees throughout the length and breadth of India.

**gr̥ha-devatā** - deity worshipped by a householder on a regular basis by *gr̥hārcana* rites while recognizing that divinity as protector of the family lineage, guardian of the house (cf. *kula-devatā*, below). Most likely such a deity is given prominence by a householder by virtue of the fact that the same deity had been so honored by the householder's father, grandfather, etc. An image of the *gr̥ha-devatā* is often worshipped alongside an image of the householder's *iṣṭa-devatā*, perhaps also an image of the family's *grāma-devatā* as well.

**gr̥hārcana** - see under *pūjā*, below.

**guṇa(s)** - according to Sāṃkhya philosophy, there are three constituent principles which in various combinations account for the permutations of *prakṛti*-matter, namely, *sattva-guṇa*, *rajo-guṇa*, and *tamo-guṇa*. These principles inhere in all objects and persons, and their relative dominance explains the most obvious characteristics or nature of that material or personality.

**guru** - spiritual preceptor, traditionally accepted as a "second, or spiritual, father" when a young Hindu lad undergoes the thread-ceremony [*upavīta*]; nowadays the term *guru* is used to refer to anyone recognized and accepted for extraordinary accomplishments as a spiritual or intellectual guide. In either case such a personage is honored as one who imparts to an aspirant spiritual discernment, knowledge and a praxis which will lead to liberation from rebirth. As such, a *guru* is obeyed, honored, even worshipped by his (or her) grateful—and enlightened—follower(s).

**hunḍi(s)** - temple strongbox(es) into which is(are) placed voluntary offerings by the faithful; not unlike a mite-box in some Christian churches. Especially prominent in temples to Murugaṇ and to Veṅkaṭeśvara.

**iṣṭa-devatā** - "chosen deity," sometimes selected under the tutelage of one's *guru* so that its powers match the devotee's needs; that deity's

image is thereafter worshipped by the devotee with special attention during domestic rites [*grhārcana*] alongside images of the devotee's *kula-devatā* (see below) and/or *grha-devatā* (see above) as well as, perhaps, his *grāma-devatā* (see above). The "chosen deity," when treated with true *bhakti*, is trusted ipso facto to stand always ready to help the votary both spiritually and materially.

**Jainism** - designation of a minority religion native to India, historically founded in the 6th cent. B.C.E., with greatest concentration today in regions in and around Karnataka.

**jīvan-mukta(s)** - refer(s) to one(s) who has/have achieved liberation [-*mukti*] in this life [*jīva*-], that is, a "living saint" who exhibits all the blissful joy and unruffled peace of a released spirit. Māṇikkavācakar and Nammālvār were but two, among countless others ancient and modern, who have been recognized by those around them as "realized saints," or *jīvan-mukta(s)*. This word is, however, technically objectionable to the Viśiṣṭādvaitins since liberation while being alive is a contradiction in terms.

**Jyeṣṭha** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which winds up the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyaṇa*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of May through mid-June (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Vaikāci*; for Malayalis, *Eḍavam*). It is during this month that one of the four major, annual Murugaṇ festivals is celebrated; and during the *Makhā* asterism of this month is commemorated Māṇikkavācakar's "absorption" into the Lord Naṭarāja at the Chidambaram temple.

**Kailāsa** - a mythical mountain, said to be part of the Himalayan ranges, where Śiva is believed to make his earthly abode with Pārvatī.

**Kali Yuga** - the present age, the fourth and last of successive periods



declining from an original golden age; supposedly commenced in February 3102 B.C.E., this *yuga* has some 425,000 years to go before ending in a cataclysm after which, following a long hiatus, another “*kalpa*” of four like, successive periods will start a cycle all over again. The *Kali Yuga* is characterized by humans with relatively short lives, vicious natures, and depraved social habits. This period’s characteristic color is black. Cf. *Dvāpara Yuga*, above, *Tretā Yuga*, below.

**kāma** - “love” and the pursuit of the lovely; one of the four legitimate goals toward which humans may strive along with *artha* and *dharma* and *mokṣa*. The good life, according to Hindu norms, encourages not only a frank acceptance of carnal instincts but the cultivation of aesthetic pleasure as mediated through the arts, literature, &c. See also *puruṣārtha(s)*, below.

**Kārttika** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which falls during the inauspicious, “dark” half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning late October through mid-November (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Aippaci*; for Malayalis, *Tuḷam*). This is the time when increasingly long nights and short days make the “darkness” palpable. Some of the rituals celebrated during *Kārttika* suggest how this is dealt with. On the night of the day following the new moon of this month, lamps are lit in celebration of the popular “Festival of Lights” honoring Lakṣmī, according to some; commemorating Rāma’s coronation, according to others; honoring Kṛṣṇa’s defeat of the evil Naraka, according to still others; and/or making Viṣṇu’s triumph over Bali, according to yet others. Fireworks displays and exchange of gifts add to the festivities. For some identified with communities of commerce, this is an appropriate moment—in the light of Lakṣmī’s legendary largesse—to close account books and mark the start of a New Year. Later in the month, at the time of the full moon (*Kārttika pūrṇimā*), Śaiva(s) remember their god’s triumph over the demon Tripura; and for devotees of Murugaṇ it is

a time to remember the birth of their lord, destined to kill the demon Tāraka. It is the time of month and year also when on Aruṇāchala Hill near Tiruvaṇṇāmalai huge bonfires are lit for several days and nights to commemorate the appearance of Śiva as a fiery *lingam* at the birth of the universe.

*kāśāya* - the mud-colored robe of a wandering *sannyāsin*; such was worn by Śiva, the primordial ascetic, and such has since been approximated by all later renunciants in their beggar's rags.

*kāvaḍi(s)* - yoke-like contrivance(s) carried on shoulders by Murukan-worshippers who undertake special penances in their Lord's honor. The contraption(s) often feature(s) flesh-piercing spikes and needles, the pain from which it is the object of the devotee to transcend by faith.

*kula-devatā* - "family god," "household deity"—rough synonym of *gṛha-devatā*, above.

*kuṇḍalinī* - in the occult physiology of *laya-yoga*, refers to a mystic presence in the spinal column which, when cultivated, rises up much like a cobra unfolds and rises off the ground, which presence permeates various *cakra* discs-of-power between the base of the spinal column and the dome of the cranium. When the *kuṇḍalinī* finally reaches and passes through the topmost *cakra* at the suture of the skull, *samādhi* will have been reached.

*laya-yoga* - one of the recognized schools of Yoga, this one based on an occult science replete with physiological imagery and characterized by the cultivation of complex psychic forces which are objectified as part of the system. See *kuṇḍalinī*, above. Other recognized schools of Yoga are *haṭha yoga*, *mantra yoga*, *rāja-yoga*, etc.

*Mādhva(s)/Mādhvāite(s)* -followers of the *Vaiṣṇava* philosopher-saint

Madhva (1238?-1317? C.E.).

**Māgha** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which falls during the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning late January through mid-February (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Tai*; for Malayalis, *Makaram*). During the "bright" half of the month, notably on the 5th day of the waxing moon, at some places to mark the advent of the verdant springtime, certain celebrations of the season are observed (e.g., *Vasanta-paṇcamī*, including honors to Sarasvatī). During that same waxing period of the month, for 9 days, Madhva's "disappearance" is commemorated by his disciples ("*Madhvanavami*"); January 30th is a day of significance as it is the anniversary of the passing of Rāmalingam in 1874. During the waning fortnight of this month, on the 13th night, the vigil of *Mahā-śivarātri* is observed.

**maṅgala-sūtra** [Var.: *māṅgalya-sūtra*; a.k.a., *tālī*] - "auspicious thread" tied round the neck of a bride during marriage by the bridegroom, which thread holds the neck ornament symbolic of a wedded woman. That emblem is worn ever thereafter so long as the husband lives. A woman who wears such an ornament is known as a "*sumāṅgalī*," and hers is considered an auspicious presence at ritual occasions. Likewise, as emblematic of her married state, a woman also wears vermillion in the part of her hair, and a toe-ring. Accordingly, these three items then are significant iconographic details normative in the depiction of goddesses—and the moreso when they are absent.

**mantra(s)** - syllable(s), or sequence(s) of syllables, which may or may not derive from a Vedic source, and may or may not be intelligible, but which when used in a ritual context is(are) assumed to tap divine powers as well as to focus human concentration by their repetition either aloud or mentally. Great stress is laid upon the proper pronunciation of a *mantra* as well as its use of properly formulated sounds at the

appropriate moment. Mystic sounds have magic power, so the consequences — good or evil — are certain to be experienced. A *guru* is expected to impart to his initiate the *mantra* of greatest, targeted potency for use by that aspirant in private meditations and worship. Calling on the name of a deity, especially one's *iṣṭa-devatā*, is an especially important *mantra* to master (e.g., for Śiva: *om nā-mac Śi-vā-ya*; for Viṣṇu: *om na-mo Nā-rā-ya-nā-ya*; etc.). See also *dhyāna-śloka(s)*, above, and *praṇava*, *stotra(s)* and *vācana(s)*, below.

**Mārgaśr̥ṣa** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which terminates the inauspicious half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of November through mid-December (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Kartikai*; for Malayalis, *Vṛścikam*). The reversal of the sun's course to return northward from its southerly trek prompts rejoicing, as for example on the last day of the month the Tamilian holiday called *Bhogi Paṇḍigai* (immediately preceding by one day *Pongal* — see *Pauṣa*, below), or by getting ready for weddings held in abeyance for the preceding six months. It is also at this time of year that groups of *bhakta(s)* circulate during the early morning hours singing hymns of praise [*bhajana(s)*] to their beloved deity, in part done to mark that it is time now for the Lord to arise from his four-month's "sleep" [*caturmāsa*]. Likewise in Kerala, there is movement among the votaries of Ayyappaṇ as they embark upon pilgrimage to the remote Śabari Hill sanctuary in anticipation of the winter solstice. Elsewhere, Murukaṇ followers celebrate a "festival of lights" in honor of the deity's six foster mothers, the "*kṛttikās*." The 11th day [*Ekādaśī*] of the waxing fortnight of this month is remembered by many as the anniversary of the revelation by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna of the teaching of the *Gītā*; at this same time also Śrīraṅgam holds for 20 days a series of processions and celebrations culminating in the massive gatherings there for "*Vaikuṇṭha Ekādaśī*" Day.

**Mīmāṃsaka** - designation for one who is follower of the *Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā* school, i.e., one who lays great stress on ritual proprieties as a salvific enterprise. *Mīmāṃsaka*(s) have often been ridiculed for their ritualistic fundamentalism by other, more liberated Hindus, past and present.

**mokṣa** - "release" of the individuated self or spirit from the cycle of birth-death-rebirth-redeath; the goal of most Hindu religious systems and an end normalized as the final aim of life according to the formulaic *puruṣārtha*(s).

**Monday** [*Somavāra*] - a generally auspicious day, named in honor of the Moon [*Soma*]. On Mondays (as also on Thursdays) worship of Śiva, among *Śaiva*(s), is observed to be somewhat more elaborate than on other days; it is also a day when *Smārta*(s) who do *pañcāyatana-pūjā* honor Śiva's presence. The most auspicious period on Mondays is the *Gulika-kāla* between 1:30 - 3 p.m.; the inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period on Mondays is between 7:30 a.m. - 9:00 a.m.

**mudrā**(s) - "symbolic position(s) of the hand," including intertwinings of the fingers and the joining of hands, observed in ritual, dance, and iconography. In the former case these bodily tokens given added impetus to the powers channeled during repetitions of *mantra*(s), and certain gestures are specific to particular aspects of the divine; in the latter, the gestures mutely convey conventionalized messages, and when two or more gestures are combined the coded messages can amount to remarkably complex iconographic statements. The most often utilized *mudrā*-gestures have specific names and standardized positions, even though their exact "meaning" may vary according to the context in which they are used.

**muni**(s) - saint(s), sage(s), or seer(s)—whose praxis usually involves a vow of silence.

**Nambūdiri(s)** - a very exclusive Brahmin caste peculiar to the Kerala regions, whose privileges include hereditary rights to conduct worship at particular temples (e.g., at Guruvāyūr — where those rights are at present being contested), and whose ranks have produced certain extraordinarily gifted scholar-saints (e.g., Śaṅkara).

**Nāyanmār(s)** - a group of some 63 Tamil poet-saints who flourished between the 7th and 10th centuries C.E., and whose utterances reflect their personal experience of Śiva as Lord of their lives. Their faith made no distinctions of caste, gender or creed, so that their company included Brahmins, kings, princesses, toddy-drawers, oil-sellers, singers and outcastes. The hymns of these Śaiva poet-saints are collected in 11 anthologies, and selections from these hymn collections have since become standard litanies of praise in Tamil Śaiva worship, both public and private. Images of Nāyanmār(s) are often found in Tamil Śaiva temples where they receive due honors as saints. Cf. Ālvār(s), above.

**orthoprax/orthopraxy** - a term useful for describing the Hindu appreciation for “right praxis, practice or behavior”; inasmuch as doctrinal views may legitimately vary so widely from one Hindu community to another, a norm based on “orthodoxy” (“right views”) is not very useful. “Orthopraxy,” by contrast, may be clearly discerned in the constancy with which are performed such rituals as *gṛhārcana* to household deities, *sandhyāvandana* to the rising sun, *tarpana* for departed ancestral spirits, *saṃskāra*-sacraments for family members, etc., hence such activities usefully serve as a set of approximate standards by which to gauge Hindu norms in action.

**pañcāyatana-pūjā** - a ceremony, practiced by *Smārta*(s) and some others, honoring in serial fashion five [*pañca*-] aniconic forms of the divine—occasionally at one sitting but more usually on a daily, rotational basis. See also under various Days of the Week, here, and essay #19.

**Paraśurāma** - "Rāma-with-an-ax," a figure popularly regarded as the sixth *avatāra*-incarnation of Viṣṇu. Legend and folklore associate this figure with Kerala ("Paraśurāma-kṣetra"); further, Paraśurāma is likewise associated with the goddess Māriyamman (see essay #28).

**Paurṇamī/Pūrṇimā** - refers to the night of the Full Moon each month, the day following which marks the commencement of the "dark," or waning, fortnight of the lunar month. During that half of the month spirits and goblins are said to be abroad, those who die fear post-mortem torment, and except for festivals honoring Śiva few other celebrations are normally mounted (although, for some, it is an appropriate time to worship the goddess [e.g., Mīnākṣī] and, for others, an important time to honor Aiyaṅār). Cf. *Amāvāsyā*, above. According to the lunar calendar prevalent in large ranges of north India, the month is reckoned between two full moons: see *Pūrṇimānta*, below, *Amānta*, above.

**Pauṣa** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which marks the commencement of the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyaṇa*] at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of December through mid-January (according to Tamil Solar reckoning, this month is *Mārkaṭi*; for Malayalis, *Dhanu*). Tamilians, who reckon the start of their subsequent month, *Tai*, with the advent of *makara-saṁkranti*, i.e., when the sun having reached its lowest elliptic south begins to move northward again (winter solstice), celebrate *Pongal* then to mark the move away from inauspicious to auspicious times. The *Ekādaśī* during the "bright" fortnight of *Pauṣa* is known as *Vaiṣṇava Ekādaśī*, and is especially potent for those who would acquire merit.

**Pavitrotsava** - a 3-, 5-, 7-, or 9- day ritual cycle signifying expiation and/or purification and/or thanksgiving, usually performed during *caturmāsa*, in which wreaths of knotted cotton threads are ceremoniously placed on temple images.



**Phālguna** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which falls during the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyaṇa*] at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of February through mid-March (according to Tamil solar reckoning, this month is *Māci*; for Malayalis, *Kumbham*). It leads up to the vernal equinox in the next month, *Caitra*. Among the better-known temple celebrations in south India during the latter part of this month which ushers in the spring season are the 10-day festivals honoring Murugaṇ [*Paṇḍuṇi Uttiram*], Kāmākṣī (her *kalyāṇotsava* at Kāñcī), and Guruvāyūrappaṇ (his “hunting” procession in Guruvāyūr).

**pradakṣiṇa** - a ritual action in which one moves round a person or cultic object in a clockwise direction, that is, keeping the revered object always to the right as a sign of the respect accorded it.

**prākāra(s)** - the courtyards—or any one of them, taken in isolation—which surround a temple in ever-expanding geometrical forms, passage through which shrine-studded areas may serve for the devotee making his or her journey to the *sanctum sanctorum* at the core of the complex as a recapitulation of life’s spiritual pilgrimage to the divine center of existence. Most temples have only three, five, or one, *prākāra(s)* but when there are seven—as at Śrīraṅgam—the design ideally replicates the world with its seven concentric continents and, at various levels of interpretation, symbolizes all that the created order contains.

**praṇava** - refers to the sacred syllable *om* [ā + u + ṛh], averred to contain all sounds, hence the most complete of all *mantra(s)*.

**prasāda** - literally, “grace” or “favor”; a designation also given to the foodstuffs which have been offered to the deity during *pūjā*, the physical remnants of which are returned by the divinity after “eating” for the spiritual nurture and on-going sustenance of votaries. Food-offerings which are advanced to the deity’s image during *pūjā* — before they mysteriously become *prasāda*—are called “*naivedya*.” One of the many names by which a temple-complex is known, *prāsāda*, derives from

this word, thereby acknowledging the central function of *prasāda* (refreshing food-remnants as well as "grace") in its basic identity.

*pūjā* - strictly speaking, refers to worship of the deity in a temple by means of "honors" advanced to the divinity's image by a professional *pūjārī*, or priest; in popular usage, the term is also used for the domestic liturgies of worship [more correctly, *gṛhārcana*] undertaken daily by a lay householder to honor the image(s) of the god(s) housed there in the private family shrine. In either case, the offerings include symbolic (or actual) cleansing of the image, changing its apparel and/or decorations, praising the divine presence with songs and recitations, offering food (cooked and uncooked), inviting the deity to "rest," etc. For these ministrations special cultic implements have been evolved, ranging from simple utensils to sophisticated objets d'art, and, the setting in which all takes place may range from a simple *pūjā*-cupboard or *pūjā*-shelf set aside in a special area in a home, to a special alcove or elaborate chamber or set of chambers in a temple.

*punḍra(s)* - "mark(s)" made on the forehead (and often elsewhere on the upper body) as a sign of sectarian persuasion, sometimes also called a "*nāmam*." The Śaivas' *tiryak-punḍra* ("horizontal mark") is made with *vibhūti*-ashes or with whitish earths, and consists of three horizontal stripes; it is also called the *tripunḍra*. The Śrī-aiṣṇavas' *ūrdhva-punḍra* is "upright" and made in the form of a "U" or "Y" with white mineral-clays augmented by red or yellow pigment; it is sometimes called the *Śrīnāmam* (Skt.) or the *Tirunāmam* (Tamil). Other groups have their own distinctive marks; as with the Śaiva(s) and Śrī-aiṣṇava(s), such marks may also be delineated at other places on the body, sites which presumably mark confluences of psychic energies, hence spots where it is appropriate to invoke god's blessed presence. For a description of the Madhvaite *punḍra*-marks, see essay #22.

*Purāṇa(s)* - "ancient stories" of gods, goddesses, saints and sites; more or less cohering in anthologies, said to be 18 in number, named

after various deities or divine forms. The Puranic corpus of Sanskrit literature is a reservoir of Hindu mythology and religious lore.

**Pūrṇimā** - see under *Paurṇamī*, above.

**Pūrṇimānta** - a system of reckoning lunar months to begin with the Full Moon [*pūrṇimā*] and with the "dark," or waning, fortnight; prevalent in large tracts of north India and in a few, significant regions in south India as well (e.g., parts of Andhra). Cf. *Amānta*, above.

**puruṣārtha(s)** - "human aims." According to traditional Hindu norms, there are four goals to which any and all human beings may legitimately aspire: *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and last, but not least, *mokṣa* — for all of which see, above.

**pustaka** - leaf manuscript, book; usually symbolizing *Vedic* teachings (see Fig. 30) but in many cases representing the utterances or collected teachings of a particular saint (see Figs. 7, 8, 22 & 30).

**Rāhu-kāla** - an "inauspicious period" of approximately ninety minutes each day, the precise timing of which varies from day to day, during which span strictly orthoprax Hindus avoid initiating activities of ritual consequence. See under the English names for the various Days of the Week.

**rajas, rajoguṇa** - according to Sāṃkhya philosophy, the principle of "passion" which, when it predominates in a personality, manifests itself in energy, ambition, jealousy, selfishness, etc.; when it predominates in a food, makes it bitter, sour, saline, astringent, pungent (like fish, poultry, most meats). Its typical color is red. See also under *guṇa*, above.

**rākṣasa(s)** - night-prowling anti-gods, both male and female, to be guarded

against; can change forms at will; Rāvaṇa, enemy of Lord Rāma, regarded as their ruler and chief.

*Śaiva(s)*, *Śaivabhakta(s)*, *Śaivism*, *Śaivite(s)* - all of these terms are derivatives from the name for the great Hindu god, Śiva, and all are used to refer to his followers. See *Śiva*, *Śiva-ism*, and *Śiva-ite*, below.

*śakti* - lit., "power, energy, capability." This homonym has three well-known, distinct—albeit related—meanings apart from other, more arcane and social usages; [1] a weapon used iconographically in the depiction of a deity to suggest that deity's powers or some aspect of that being's potential or capability; [2] the abstract power of creation and extension of being, of convergence and concentration of energy potential within the Divine Unity; [3] that same abstract power personified as feminine presence, usually in the figure(s) of the female consort(s) abiding at the side of the male god, but occasionally in the form of a solitary goddess who is understood to be the embodiment of active power, mundane or mystic.

*saṁādhi* - "union," "absorption," final peace. This term finds general usage in at least three different ways: [1] the final step or stage of Yoga; [2] the goal of final beatitude posited by any spiritual discipline or holy lifestyle in which the individuated self becomes joined to or absorbed in the unindividuated other; and [3] the final resting place or tomb of a saint (see, for example, essay #23). See also *kuṇḍalinī*, above.

*saṁnyāsa/saṁnyāsin(s)* - "renunciation"/"renunciant(s)"; according to Hindu norms for *orthoprax* males there are four stages [*āśrama(s)*] to pass through sequentially during the course of life: a period of acculturation and learning [*brahmācārya*], a period during which one marries and rears a family, tends to business and to social responsibilities [*gārhasthya*], a period of "retirement" and spiritual self-cultivation in company with one's wife [*vānaprastha*], and finally a period of solitary

renunciation [*saṁnyāsa*] when one cuts all ties with former self and seeks after liberation as a solitary truth-seeker. Traditionally the emphasis on *saṁnyāsa* is within the context, and is the culmination, of the three other "stages." In some circles, taking *saṁnyāsa* is a process similar to entering a Christian holy order whereafter the aspirant, having "died" to the world, under a new titular name and with confirmation of purpose, takes on a full time, holy career. In either case, the renunciant becomes in some sense a houseless wanderer, begging for sustenance, having few possessions, wearing the "ocre" robe [*kāṣāya*]. See essays #8, 9, 21, 22, 23.

*saṁskāra*(s) - lit., "purification," "preparation," "making perfect"; in normative, orthoprax Hindu parlance, refers to one or more of the "sacraments" or rites performed to a person during his lifetime (and beyond, for there are pre-natal and post-mortem *saṁskāra*(s) as well) to purify that being encased in the body, to sanctify it, and to prepare it for a perfect accomodation to *mokṣa*. By some counts there are as many as 40 *saṁskāra*-sacraments to be celebrated as rites of passage through the life-cycle, most well-known among them being *nāmakaraṇa* ("name-giving"), *upanayana* ("thread investiture"), *vivāha* ("marriage"), and *śmaśāna* ("cremation").

*sāṛī* - a seamless cloth garment wound and draped about the body, worn by women; different styles in which the *sāṛī* is worn serve to denote regional, social and marital identity of the wearer; color symbolism is occasionally significant, too (e.g., red for auspicious situations, white for mourning, &c.). Cf. *dhoṭī*, above.

*sattva*, *sattvaguna* - according to Sāṁkhya philosophy, the principle of "goodness" which, when it predominates in a personality manifests itself in intelligence, nobility, forbearance, long life, wisdom, etc.; when it predominates in a food makes it bland and agreeable (like milk, curds, ghee, wheat, certain fruits and vegetables). Its typical color is

white. See also under *guṇa*, above.

**Saturday** [*Śanivāra*] - governed over by Śani (Saturn), this is considered to be the most inauspicious day of each week. A month which has five Saturdays is regarded as especially dangerous. Yet, Saturday is a day remarkably sacred to those who worship Venkaṭeśvara and to those who worship the Somāskanda aspect of Śiva *en famille*. Its most auspicious period is during *Gulika-kāla* between 6 - 7:30 a.m.; Saturday's inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period is from 9 - 10:30 a.m.

**Śiva, Śiva-ism, Śiva-ite(s)** - Śiva, "the auspicious one," is one the major deities recognized and honored in contemporary Hinduism; he takes many forms, several of which are explored in essays in Section Two, *supra*. The cult of Śiva is referred to as Śiva-ism, and any one of his followers may be called a Śiva-ite, groups of them Śiva-ites. Anglicized Sanskritic derivations based on the term Śiva are also sometimes used, for which, see *Śaiva(s)*, *Śaivabhakta(s)*, *Śaivism* and *Śaivite(s)*, above.

**Smārta(s)** - a sector of orthoprax Hindus whose modes of behavior serve to keep alive traditions deriving from *smṛti* teachings, hence whose practices in fact reveal a wide range of options both in belief and practice if not also a widely tolerated, even normatizing, syncretistic spirit. A good example is the *pañcāyatana pūjā* practiced by some *Smārta* Brahmins: in this, there is a rotation worship of Śiva, Murugaṇ, Gaṇapati, Viṣṇu, one of the goddesses alongside or in addition to an *iṣṭa-devatā* and a *kula-devatā*.

**Śrāvaṇa** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which falls during the inauspicious half of the year [*Dakṣiṇāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of July through mid-August (according to Tamil solar reckoning this is *Āṭi*-month; for Malayalis, *Karkāḍakam*). On the 5th day of the "bright" or waxing half of the month is marked the popular *Nāga-pañcamī*, when *nāga*-

serpents in all their forms are worshipped. And, on the last Friday of the same fortnight, young girls perform *Varalakṣmī-vrata*. It is also in this part of the year in Kerala that *Onam*, its most joyous time in the annual calendar, is celebrated as a harvest festival in honor of the exiled demon-king, Bali. In Kerala also pilgrims who adore Ayyappaṇ converge then to make the pilgrimage to Śabarīmala. And, it is also the month during 7 days of which followers of Rāghavendra far and wide commemorate their saint's *samādhi*.

*Śrī-vaiṣṇava(s)/Śrī-vaiṣṇavism* - a sector among worshippers of the All-Pervading Lord Viṣṇu which gives a place of special prominence in their devotion and theology to the goddess Lakṣmī (=“Śrī”). *Śrī-vaiṣṇava(s)*, the followers of the cult, and *Śrī-vaiṣṇavism*, the cult itself, are both manifestations of Hinduism more visible in south India than elsewhere in the subcontinent. See also *ūpa*, below.

*stotra(s)* - “text(s)” or “verse(s),” usually sectarian in origin and tone, sung or chanted in praise of a particular deity; medieval religious writers in Sanskrit often were panegyrists, and to them can be traced many of the *stotra(s)* still popular and in use today in public and private liturgies of worship. See also *Appendix*, pp. 251-258, above.

*śūdras(s)* - lowest among the four traditional, hierarchical divisions of Hindu society, assigned menial roles serving the three higher ranks [*vaiśya(s)*, *kṣatriya(s)*, and *brāhmaṇa(s)*]. One of the significant thrusts of the *bhakti* movement was to affirm that—along with women—*śūdra(s)*, despite their lowly social status, could in effect purify and elevate themselves to the ranks of the eternally blessed by virtue of their love of God.

*sumangalī* - an honorific epithet for a married Hindu woman. By convention she should display five outward auspicious tokens, or *maṅgala(s)*: the *maṅgala-sūtra* at her throat, bangles on her wrists, toe-rings, a nose-

stud, and a proper *tilaka*-mark on her forehead—and only married women are allowed to wear all five of these. *Sumangali-pūjā*, in which five *sumangali*(s) are honored, is an important celebration observed among followers of the Rāghavendra cult (see essay #23).

**Sunday [Ravivāra]** - a day governed over by the Sun, as such the day of the week usually reserved by *Smārta*(s) who perform *pañcāyatana-pūjā* for worship of Sūrya or Ravi. It is also a day during which worship of Hanumān is believed to be particularly potent—another instance of that figure's mysterious affinity to the Sun. Likewise, Sundays are special days in the worship cycles of various goddesses and, in particular, to the worship of Māriyamman. The auspicious *Gulika-kāla* on Sundays is between 3 - 4:30 p.m. That is followed by the inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* from 4:30 - 6 p.m.—a time which, significantly, many Indian Christians set for their weekly church services (presumably to demonstrate they no longer feel themselves subject to prevailing Hindu “superstitions” concerning auspicious and inauspicious times).

**tamas, tamoguṇa** - according to Sāṅkhya philosophy, the principle of “darkness” which, when it predominates in a personality manifests itself in stupidity, languor, corpulence, immorality, etc.; when it predominates in a food makes it cold, flat, stale, putrid (like mushrooms, turnips, garlic, dark grains, pork, beef and eels). Its typical color is black. See also *guṇa*, above.

**“tantrism”** - as used here, refers to a pervasive temper influencing Hindu praxis which accounts for—among other things—the presupposition among aspirants of the efficacy of esoteric diagrams [*yantra*(s)] in rituals aimed at self-transcendence and of arcane syllables or formulas [*mantra*(s)] in meditative and trance-inducing exercises; the presence of the divine feminine as an omnipotent, sometimes harrowing, saviour figure; and the celebration of normally taboo objects or practices as means to spiritual liberation. Subtle and not so subtle imageries of polluting blood and of prohibited sexual unions are prominent in the mystical symbol



systems of many—but not all—tantric cults.

**tāpa** - ceremonial “branding” (with the emblem of Viṣṇu’s conch on the left shoulder, the sign of Viṣṇu’s discus on the right shoulder); one of the five sacramental steps [*pañcasamśkāra(s)*: *tāpa*, *pūṇḍra*, *nāma*, *mantra*, *yāga*] initiating **orthoprax Śrī-vaiṣṇava(s)** into the blessed state consequent to having taken “refuge” [*samāśrayaṇa/prapatti/śaraṇāgati/nikṣepa/nyāsa/bharanyāsa*—all more or less synonyms] with the Lord whereafter that devotee is believed to live and die in His grace (see essay #21). *Tāpa*-brands are visible and honored on the image of Lord Veṅkaṭeśvara (Fig. 18) and on the body of Madhva (Fig. 22).

**tapasvin** - one who undertakes *tapas*, that is, one whose lifestyle is characterized by the rigors of asceticism and penance.

**Thursday** [*Bṛhaspativāra/Guruvāra*] - as with Monday, Wednesday and Friday, Thursday also is considered a generally auspicious day. It is governed over by the planet Jupiter. On this day among **Smārta(s)** who do *pañcāyatana-pūjā*, the *śālagrāma*-stone representing Viṣṇu’s presence is honored. It is a day also when worship of Śiva appears to be somewhat elaborated (as is also the case on Mondays). Further, as also on Tuesdays and Fridays, worship addressed to Lakṣmī also appears to be more elaborate than that same worship on other days. Finally, Thursday is a day that is evidently especially sacred to followers of Rāghavendra. The most auspicious period each Thursday is during *Gulika-kāla* between 9 - 10:30 a.m.; the inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period on Thursdays is 1:30 - 3 p.m.

**tilaka** - a “mark (on the skin),” most often on the forehead, or on a cultic instrument, made with colored earths, sandalpaste, unguents, or the like, for the purpose of adornment or as a sectarian identification. See also *tripuṇḍra* and *ūrdhvaṇḍra*, below.

**Tretā Yuga** - the second of the four cosmic periods of time succeeding from an original Golden Age (see also *Dvāpara Yuga* and *Kali Yuga*, above). This is when, as it were, the Cow of Dharma, formerly standing squarely on four legs, now limps on but three. Righteousness which formerly permeated all behavior has now diminished by one-fourth; sacrifices and rituals enter the picture to compensate for the lost *dharma*. Humans who formerly lived 4000 years now live only 3000 year life-spans. The period itself lasts only 1,296,000 human years instead of the original 1,728,000—a 25% loss. And worse things are destined in succeeding ages as more losses occur. The typical color associated with this period is red. It was toward the end of this *yuga* that Viṣṇu incarnated himself as Prince Rāma in order to quell the reckless *rākṣasa* ruler, Rāvaṇa.

**tripuṇḍra** - a "triple mark" placed on the body, most usually on the forehead but also on the arms, chest and abdomen as well as on cultic objects; made by taking the middle three fingers of the right hand (index, middle and ring fingers), dipping them in powder or paste—usually white—and running those horizontally to transfer the powder or paste to the targeted place; this sign is made to designate that what is marked belongs to Śiva, whose similar marks are made with *vibhūti*-ashes. See Figs. 7, 8 & 9; and Figs. 2, 3 & 4. See also *puṇḍra(s)*, above.

**Tuesday [Maṅgalavāra]** - this day under the influence of the planet Mars is considered inauspicious generally. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, some general patterns of worship are notable. For example, among *Smārta(s)* who perform *pañcāyatana-pūjā* this day is reserved for the worship of Subrahmaṇya (=Skanda=Murugaṇ). Further, it is a day also sacred to Gaṇeśa. Moreover, it is one during which special liturgies to the goddess appear to be generated; Lakṣmī, in particular, is given a more prominent form of worship on this day (as also on Thursdays and Fridays). Along with

Friday (an auspicious day, generally), Tuesday also sees special attention given to worship of Aiyaṇār, to Nāga(s), and to the sacred *Tulast*-plant. Tuesday's most auspicious period is during *Gulika-kāla* between noon - 1:30 p.m.; the inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period every Tuesday is 3:00 - 4:30 p.m.

**upavīta** - the "sacred thread" worn by members of the three so-called "twice-born" [*dvija*] classes, first donned during the *upanayana-saṃskāra* when an eligible lad approaching adolescence is symbolically adopted by his *guru* and given, as it were, a "second birth" (into the life of the Hindu tradition) in contradistinction to his natural, or first, birth effected by his parents; its display, circling his torso from the left shoulder down under his right arm, signifies for all to see that the wearer is, metaphorically at least "bound by the laws" of Hindu orthopraxy for the remainder of his adult life. Sometimes called a *yajñopavīta*, the cord or thread is made ideally of *muñja* grass but in fact more often derives from cotton, and has no fewer than three distinct strands, often exhibiting a number of knots and sometimes, as well, talismans. Most images of gods and saints reveal the subject wearing the *upavīta* cord—its absence being a significant commentary on that figure's social standing or stage in life. Cf. *maṅgala-sūtra*, above.

**ūrdhva-puṇḍra** - an "upright mark" made on the body of a devotee, usually on the forehead, or on a cultic instrument to indicate sectarian identification with and devotion to Viṣṇu; made with white clay and pigmented earths or sandalpaste. The general shape of a "U" denotes that the devotee is an adherent of the *Vaṭakalai* ["northern"] school of Śrī-vaiṣṇavism, sometimes referred to as the Monkey-Hold School, while a so-called "Y"-shape affirms that the devotee is an adherent of the *Teṅkalai* ["southern"] school, sometimes referred to as the Cat-Hold School. See Figs. 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 & 23. Cf. *tripuṇḍra*, above.

**utsava(s) / utsavabera(s)** - “festival(s)” conducted in the course of a liturgical year, or on special occasions, at a temple/“portable, processional image(s)” paraded at festive occasions through the temple precincts and into nearby public thoroughfares to give *darśana* of the divine figure(s) to the masses.

**Uttarāyaṇa** - the auspicious half of the year; more specifically, the six months from the Indic *amānta* month of *Pauṣa* (December-January; according to Tamil solar reckoning, the month is *Mārkaṭi*; for Malayalis, *Dhanu*) to *Āṣāḍha* (June-July; according to Tamil solar reckoning, the month is *Āṇi*; for Malayalis, *Midunam*), roughly between the winter solstice and the summer solstice when the sun takes its “northern course” and the days get increasingly long. This turn-about is a cause for great joy. In Tamil Nadu the commencement of *Uttarāyaṇa* is marked by the festive 4-day celebration of *Pōṇgal*, starting with the advent of *makara-saṃkrānti*. Generally speaking, this “light” half of the year is a time for festivals and celebrations, and it is certainly the so-called wedding season when neighborhoods all over the South resound night and day with wedding ceremonies being broadcast over loud-speaker systems. One who dies during this period is believed to take the path to the Sun leading to liberation. Cf. *Dakṣiṇāyana*, above.

**vacana(s)** - “utterance(s)” by a poet or saint, ascribed as having divine inspiration, revealing divine concerns; as a category of sacred or authoritative disclosure, *vacana* differs from both *śruti* and *smṛti* as it is neither eternal nor of unspecified memory but originates, on the contrary, in a particular time and place (as, for examples, the utterances of the *Āṭvār(s)* and *Nāyanmār(s)*, which see, above). Collections of *vacana(s)* have been made by both *Vaiṣṇava(s)* and *Śaiva(s)*, among others, and have come into use as litanies in praise of Viṣṇu and Śiva, respectively, in both public worship and private devotions.

**vāhana(s)** - lit., "conveyance(s)," or "vehicle(s)." In the context of Hindu images, the term *vāhana* refers to the companion creature which serves to carry the deity from place to place or, metaphorically speaking, the token emblem which serves to convey that two- or three-dimensional image from its material manifestation to its internal, spiritual presence within the beholder. Vividly painted replicas of immediately recognizable *vāhana(s)* are often found located at the corners of the outermost walls of temple compounds in south India to identify the deity within (the peacock at Murugaṅ temples, the lion at Durgā temples, Nandi at Śiva temples, Garuḍa at Viṣṇu temples etc.) At its most colorful manifestation, the term *vāhana* is also used for the often oversize, highly decorated, wood-carved, shoulder-borne carriages shaped in various theriomorphic or fantasitic forms to transport *utsavabera(s)* in festive processions.

**Vaiśākha** - Sanskrit name for the Indic *amānta* month which falls during the auspicious half of the year [*Uttarāyana*], at a time roughly corresponding to the 30 days spanning the latter part of April through mid-May. According to the solar reckoning followed by the Tamilians and the Malayalis this, then, is when (as the sun enters the constellation of *Meṣa* for the Tamils and, for the Malayalis, on the day after the New Moon of the first full lunar cycle after the vernal equinox) they commence their New Year. Accordingly, this month is for them the first month of the year, *Cittirai* and *Meḍam*, respectively, and is appropriately marked with celebrations. This is the hottest, most searing time of year, and during this time are seen some extraordinary temple rituals. For example, the 12-day "marriage" festival of Mīnākṣī to Sundarēśvara at Madurai is one the great events in south India. Elsewhere, at Guruvāyūr temple, the month is remembered as especially sacred to Kṛṣṇa; there pilgrims undertake the "*Vaiśākha vrata*" by listening to stories of Kṛṣṇa and seeking a special *darśana* of his face. Also in Kerala, Ayyappaṅ devotees undertake pilgrimage to Śabarī. As well, regularly on the second Tuesday of this month, processions featuring the goddess occur at Kālī temples

in Tamil Nadu (in one, at Tirumallairayam, this approximates the time when only once in five years a wooden image of Kālī normally kept hidden is brought out). At Murukan temples and at shrines dedicated to Aiyaṇār, the field-guardian deity, the season seems to elicit special festivals lasting up to ten days. It is during this month also—but on a pan-Indian basis—that the birthday of the Vaiṣṇava saint, Nammālvār, is celebrated for ten days at both temple and home shrines. And throughout the South, and beyond, the 5th day of the waxing fortnight of Vaiśākha is used to observe Śaṅkara's *jayantī*.

**Vaiṣṇava(s)/Vaiṣṇava-bhakta(s)/Vaiṣṇavism/Vaiṣṇavites** - all of these terms derive from the name of the All-Pervading lord, Viṣṇu, and all are used to refer to his followers. See Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu-ism, Viṣṇu-ite(s), below.

**Varāha** - name of the God Viṣṇu in his 3rd earthly *avatāra*-form as the heroic boar who dived into the watery abyss, there to quell the demon Hiraṇyākṣa and to rescue the endangered goddess Bhū (Earth), raising her upon his tusk from the ocean. Certain ranges of south India today are believed to have a special affinity to Varāha, e.g., the tracts near Tirupati, where (among other places) it is claimed he is the aboriginal "owner" or master of the area.

**Veda(s)/Vedic scriptures** - (lit., "wisdom") the primary, authoritative oral and textual traditions of Hinduism, revered as not of human origin, and ascribed to be eternal, imperishable, infallible, incontrovertible, etc. The precise constituents of the "Vedas" varies according to usage of the term, but contains at least the *Rg-veda* verses of praise addressed to various ancient deities; sometimes includes much more, indeed, all of Sanskrit religious literature if not all Hindu literature and utterances in the vernaculars as well. A more normative definition of "the *Veda(s)*," however, includes specifically the four Sanskrit collections of hymns and formulas known as the *Rg-veda*, *Sāma-veda*, *Yajur-veda* and

*Atharva-veda* along with their relevant *Brāhmaṇa*-commentaries, *Āraṇyaka*-treatises and *Upaniṣad*-teachings; even so, this more limited usage constitutes a formidable anthology of literature, an impressive reservoir of doctrines. In Hindu iconography, the rich storehouse of Vedic lore is often symbolized by the presence of a *pustaka*, or palm-leaf manuscript.

*vibhūti* - “ashes” of cow-dung or from burnt offerings made to the Lord Śiva; Śiva is said to smear his body with *vibhūti*-ash, hence his devotees do likewise in imitation of and honor to him. Cf. *tripuṇḍra*, above. See also *puṇḍra* and *ūrdhva-puṇḍra*, above.

**Viṣṇu, Viṣṇu-ism, Viṣṇu-ite(s)** - Viṣṇu the “All-Pervading” one, is one of the major deities recognized and honored in contemporary Hinduism; he is worshipped most widely in the form of his *avatāra*(s), or descents [from heaven], Kṛṣṇa and/or Rāma—see essays #10, 12-15. The cult of Viṣṇu is referred to as Viṣṇu-ism, individuals within the cult as Viṣṇu-ites. Anglicized Sanskritic derivations based on the term Viṣṇu are also sometimes used, to wit, *Vaiṣṇava*(s), *Vaiṣṇava-bhakta*(s), *Vaiṣṇavism*, and *Vaiṣṇavites*, for which, see above.

**Wednesday [*Budhavāra*]** - governed over by the planet Mercury, this day is conceded to be a generally auspicious one — not unlike Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Among *Smārta*(s) who perform *pañcāyatana-pūjā* this is the day Gaṇeśa is centrally honored. Wednesday’s most auspicious period is during *Gulika-kāla* between 10:30 a.m. - noon; the inauspicious *Rāhu-kāla* period immediately follows between 12 o’clock noon - 1:30 p.m.

**yāga(s) / yajña(s)** - “offering(s)” in the form of oblations ceremonially sacrificed into a sacred fire by appropriate priestly personnel as a means of worship or appeasement of deities not necessarily near at hand.

Cf. *pūjā*, above, in which worship is done to an honored presence without formal fire-rituals.

*yakṣa(s)* / *yakṣī(s)* - elemental being(s) — both male(s) and female(s) and of different sizes—who are geneally benevolent, and who dwell in sylvan settings as well as on mountains, around rocks, in the vicinities of rivers and streams. Their presence invariably implies riches and abundance, as they are regularly regarded in mythology as custodians of treasures.



## Suggestions for Further Study

This list can be neither exhaustive nor definitive;  
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## Index

### A

- Acyutaprekṣa, 147  
 Ādi Śaṅkara, *see* Śaṅkara  
 Ādiśeṣa, 76, 106, 108;  
     *see also* Ananta; Nāga(s); Śeṣa  
 Advaita (Vedānta), Advaitin(s), Advaitic  
     thought, 34, 60, 62, 64, 66, 69, 143,  
     146, 163 n.37; *see also* Vedānta  
 Agastya, 61  
 Agni, 228  
 Aiyāṅār, 210-218 *passim*, 247 n.7;  
     cult, 214, 215, 216;  
     line-drawing of, 211 (Fig. 31);  
     personality of, 213, 215  
 Akṣamālā-rosary, 202f.;  
     *see also* Rudrākṣa-beads  
     *see also* Tulasi-beads  
 Ālakaṛ (Viṣṇu at Madurai complex), 196  
 Ālvār(s), 111, 112, 113, 114, 116, 118, 132,  
     133, 142, 148, 162n.29 & 31, Glossary;  
     *see also* Divyaprabandham  
 Ālvārtirunagari, 162n.30  
 Ambā, 49  
 Ambikā, 49, 124  
 Ānandatīrtha, 147  
 Ananta, 76, 106, 108, 239;  
     *see also* Ādiśeṣa; Nāga(s); Śeṣa  
 Aṅgada, 83  
 Appayya Dīkṣita, 35  
 Ārādhana, 159  
 Ardhanārīśvara, 179  
 Arjuna, 97f  
 Āśrama(s), 24  
 Aṣṭalakṣmī, 185  
 Avatāra, 76, 97, 105

- Ayyappa, 218-225 *passim*, 161 n.19, 247 n.7;  
     line-drawing of, 217 (Fig. 32)

### B

- Bādarāyaṇa, 139, 148  
 Bālāji, 121, 123, Glossary;  
     *see also* Veṅkaṭeśvara  
 Bālakṛṣṇa, 90-92 *passim*, 96, 102;  
     line-drawing of, 89 (Fig. 12)  
 Basil, plant, *see* Tulasi-plant  
 Bhadrāchalam, 79, 159n.2  
 Bhagavad Gītā, 60, 96-100 *passim*, 140,  
     148, 155; *see also* Gītācārya  
 Bharata, 82  
 Bhaṭṭa, Veṅkaṭa, *see* Rāghavendra  
 Bhīma, 146, 163 n. 40  
 Bhīṣma, 71  
 Bhū/Bhūdevī, 101, 109, 114  
 Bhūloka Vaikuṇṭha, 116; *see also* Vaikuṇṭha  
 Bilva leaf, 19f., 36, 161n.20, 246 [note],  
     Glossary  
 Brahmā, 18f., 45, 72n.8, 169, 202, 204, 236  
 Bṛndā, 92, 131, 241ff.  
 Bṛndāvana, 96 [town], 156-159 *passim*, 164  
     n.44 [Rāghavendra's *samādhi*], 241-246  
     *passim* [stand for Tulasi-plant]  
 Buddhi, 11  
 Buddhism, Buddhist(s), 25, 58, Glossary

### C

- Caṇḍa, 173  
 Caturdaśī-Day, 168, 174  
 Chicago (IL, USA, temple at), 123  
 Chidambaram, 22, 30ff., 35ff., 49, 51, 56,  
     57, 67, 68, 116, 195;  
     line drawing of Śiva-Naṭarāja at, 29  
     (Fig. 4); mystery of, 35  
 Cittirai Festival at Madurai, 196;

see also *Kalyāṇotsava*

Curse(s), 131

## D

Dallas (TX, USA, temple at), 123

*Damaru*-drum, 27, 28, 33, 42

*Daṇḍa*-staff, 64, 140, 150, 157, 163n.37

*Darbhaśayanam*, 79, 159n.1

*Darśana*, 36, 105, 116, 118, 208 n. 21

*Daśaprakaraṇa*, by Madhva, 148

Dayananda Sarasvati, Swami, 66, 70

Days of Special Worship

Sunday, 86, 162n.27, 168, 174, 190f.

Monday, 21, 162n.27

Tuesday, 9, 50, 162n.27, 168, 174,  
178, 186, 197, 216, 237, 246

Wednesday, 162n.27

Thursday, 21, 127, 158, 162n.27, 186

Friday, 50, 162n.27, 178, 186, 197,  
216, 237, 246

Saturday, 122, 161n.20, 162n.27

*Amāvāsyā* (New Moon), 174, *Glossary*

*Pūrṇimā/Purnamī* (Full Moon), 168,  
178, 197, 216, *Glossary*

*Navamī* (9th day of each fortnight),  
150, 168

*Ekādaśī* (11th day of each fortnight),  
151, *Glossary*

*Caturdaśī* (14th day of each fortnight),  
168, 174

*Devāyānā*, 227, 229 (daughter of Indra)

*Devī*, 166-207 (Section Four);

see under *Ambā*, *Ambikā*, *Bhūdevī*,

*Durgā*, *Kālī*, *Kāmākṣī*, *Lakṣmī*,

*Mahīśāsura*mardini, *Māriyamman*,

*Mīnākṣī*, *Pārvatī*, *Rādhā*, *Rājarājesvarī*,

*Rukmiṇī*, *Sarasvatī*, *Satyabhāmā*, *Sītā*,

*Umā*, *Vallī*, *et al.*

*Devaki*, 104

*Dharma*, 78, 79, 82, 96, 105, 219, *Glossary*;  
see also *Gitācārya*

*Dīpāvalī* (*Diwālī*), 92, 102, 176, 188, 206n.3

*Divyaprabandham*, 136, 142, 162n.31

*Durgā*, 9, 49, 50, 166-172 *passim*, 174, 188,  
205; alternate names, 170, 172;

line-drawing of, 167 (Fig. 24);

worship of, 166ff.

*Dvaita Vedānta*, *Dvaitin(s)*, *Dvaita*

thought, 145, 146, 150, 153, 155,  
163n.37

## G

*Gadyatrāya*, 111, 161n.18

*Gajalakṣmī*, 181-188 *et passim*;

line-drawing of, 179 (Fig. 27)

see also *Lakṣmī*

*Gaṇapati* (*Gaṇeśa*), 3-12 *passim*, 20, 38, 41,

43, 49, 73n.15, 124, 126, 162n.24 &

27, 188, 239; alternate names of, 5;

line-drawing of, 4 (Fig. 1);

worship of, 9ff., 222

*Gāṇapatya(s)*, 9, 11n.4, 126, 226, *Glossary*

*Ganges*, river, 26f., 28, 34, 124, 182 (celestial)

*Garuḍa*, 3, 85, *Glossary*

*Gauḍapāda*, 60, 61

*Gaurī*, 48

*Gaurī-pūjā*, 48

*Gitā*, see *Bhagavad-Gītā*

*Gitābhāṣya*, by Rāmānuja, 140

*Gitācārya* (*Kṛṣṇa*), 96-100 *passim*, 105;

line-drawing of, 95 (fig. 14)

*Gokarn*, 22

*Grāma-devatā*, 166, 214, *Glossary*

*Guruvāyūr* (Kerala), 102

*Guruvāyūrappan*, 102-106 *passim*;

line-drawing of, 106 (Fig. 16)

## H

*Hampi*, 154

*Hanumān*, 3, 78, 82-90 *passim*, 127, 146,

163n.40; alternate names, 85;

depicted poses, 84f., 159n.4;

line-drawing of, 81 (Fig. 11);

*siddhi*-powers, 85, 88, 159n.5;

worship of, 86ff.

*Hari-Hara-putra*, 219 (cf. 213)

*Hinduism*, 37, 66, 110, 210, 216, 234;

future of, 123

"Hook-swinging," [*cetil* in Tamil, *sidi* in  
Telugu] 191, 232

*Huṇḍi*-boxes, 121f., 130, 231, *Glossary*

## I

Indus Valley period, 16, 25, 72 n. 7, 218

*Irumuḍi*-bag, 221

*Iṣṭadevatā*(s), 80, 87, 116, 162n.27, 241, *Glossary*

## J

Jagadguru, 61

Jainism, Jain(s), 25, 58, *Glossary*

Jalandhara, 241f.; *see also* Bṛndā

*Jayantī* [birth-commemoration],

Gaṇapati, 9f.; Hanumān, 86;

Kṛṣṇa, 91f., 105, 112, 128;

Muruga, 232;

Nammālvār, 111, 136; Rāma, 79, 111

Rāmānuja, 142; Śaṅkara, 62

*Jīvanmukti*, *Jīvanmukta*(s), *Jīvātma*, 56, 134, *Glossary*

## K

Kailāsa, 38, 49, 73n.16, *Glossary*

Kālāḍi, 58

Kālahasti, 22, 124

Kālī, 49, 172-176 *passim*, 188, 206n.2 & 6; alternate names, 176; line-drawing of, 171 (Fig. 25)

Kali Yuga, 108, 118, *Glossary*

*Kalyāṇotsava*, 51, 180, 196 [*Cittirai Festival* at Madurai], 232

Kāma, Kāmadeva, 28, 44ff., 63, 176, 177, 198, 200, *Glossary*; *see also* Manmatha

Kāmākṣī, 49, 73n. 19, 176-180 *passim*, 207n.9-14; line-drawing of, 175 (Fig. 26) worship of, 178, 180

*Kamaṇḍalu*-pitcher, 27, 64, 74n.26, 157

Kambaṇ, author of *Irāmāvatara*, 79

Kāñci, Kanchipuram, a.k.a. Conjeevaram, 49, 51, 62, 63, 114, 116, 138f., 177f., 207n.9

Kārtikeya, 161n.20, 227

Kṛṣṇa, Lord, 90-106 *passim* 127, 128, 154, 160n.6 & 7, 206n.3, 238, 239, 245,

248n.14; birthday, 91f., 105, 112, 128; line-drawing of, 89 (Fig. 12), 93 (Fig. 13), 95 (Fig. 14), 99 (Fig. 15), 103 (Fig. 16), 235, (Fig. 34, detail); names, 96; wives, 100ff.; worship of, 91f., 96, 98, 101f., 130

*Kṣudra-devatā*(s), 206n.7

*Kula-devatā*, 91, 116, 180, 215, *Glossary*

Kumbakonam, 79, 153, 154

*Kuṇḍalinī*-power, 27, *Glossary*

Kurukshetra, 98; Kurus, 97

## L

Lakṣmaṇa, 76-82 *passim*, 162n.33

Lakṣmī, 50, 76, 91, 111, 118f., 120, 181-188 *passim*, 205, 242, 244; Kolhāpur temple of, 119, 184; line-drawing of, 179 (Fig. 27); various names & forms of, 181, 185, 186, 188; *see also* Gajalakṣmī

*Līṅga*, aniconic form of Śiva, 14-22 *passim*, 28, 40, 62, 72n.1, 124, 169, 178, 221, 238; *bāṇa* ("found")-*līṅga*(s), 16, 124, 126; kept wet in temples, 20; line-drawing of, 15 (Fig. 2), 235 (Fig. 34 - detail); six sites in south India where housed, 22; story of its greatness, 18f.; styles and types of, 16f.; worship of, 19ff.

*Līṅgayāt*(s), 17

Lotus(es), 42, 50, 170, 181 *passim*, 198

## M

Madhva, 127, 143-151 *passim*, 152, 155, 157; alternate names, 146; line-drawing of, 144 (Fig. 22)

Mādhvas/Mādhvaites (followers of Madhva), 52, 127, 145f., 148ff., 153f., 157, 160n.10, 163n.37, 164n.44, 243, *Glossary*

Mādhva *maṭhas*, 145f., 153

*Madhvavijaya*, by Nārāyaṇapaṇḍitācārya, 163n.40

Madhurakavi, 133, 134

Madurai, 49, 51, 54, 111, 194ff., 214

*Mahābhārata*, 11n.2, 71, 97, 98, 130

**Mahāyogin-form of Śiva**, 24-30 *passim*, 32, 33, 38, 40, 41, 63; line-drawing of, 23 (Fig. 3)

**Mahiṣāsura**, 169, 170

**Mahiṣāsura-mārdinī**, 170

**Maṅgala-sūtra**, 42, 170, 172, 177, 183, 198, 200, 202, *Glossary*

**Māṇikkavācakaḥ**, 52-58 *passim*, 67, 73n.13, 132, 148; line-drawing of, 53 (Fig. 27)

**Nālvar**-status, 54, 57, 73n.20; secular career in government, 54f.;

**Tiruvācakam**, his greatest work, 55f., 67

**Manmatha**, 28, 177; *see also* Kāmadeva

**Mantrālaya**, 152, 155, 158

**Māraṇ**, *see* Nammālvār

**Māriyamman**, 49, 160n.7, 188-194 *passim*, 214, 238, 248n.15; alternate names, 189; head, disembodied, 189, 192; line-drawing of, 187 (Fig. 28); temple centers of, 190; worship of, 190f.

**Maturakavi**, 133, 134

**Melkote**, 139, 140

**Mīmāṃsā**, **Mīmāṃsaka(s)**, 31, 58, 155, *Glossary*

**Minākṣī**, 49, 73n.19, 111, 194-200 *passim*; line-drawing of, 193 (Fig. 29); symbolism of, 190, 200; worship of, 195ff., 200

**Mohini**, 113, 213, 219

**Murugaṇ**, 38, 41, 67, 68, 225-233 *passim*, 239, 248n.15; alternate names of, 225ff.; consorts of, 227, 229f.; line-drawing of, 226 (Fig. 33); "meaning" of iconography, 227ff.; six centers of cult, 231-233; worship of, 232ff.

**Muslim(s)**, 74n.22, 114, 159, 222, 223, 248n.10

## N

**Nāga(s)**, as motif, and under worship, 17, 20, 26, 27, 28, 34, 41, 120, 127, 151, 173, 234, 241 *passim*, 246, 248n.15 &

16; associated w. many deities, 239; line-drawing of **Nāgakaḥ**, 235 (Fig. 34)

**Naivedya**, food-offerings, 20

**Nālvar(s)**, 54, 57, 73n.20

**Nambūdiri Brahmin(s)**, 58, 105, *Glossary*

**Nammālvār**, 111, 112, 113, 132-137 *passim*, 142, 148, 161n.21, 162n.30; function of, 136f.; hagiography, 132f.; iconography of, 133f.; image of, 113, 134-136; line-drawing of, 129 (Fig. 20); worship of, 136

**Nandi**, Śiva's bull, 27, 41, 46, 73n.14

**Narasimha**, 130 [*ugra*-form]

**Naṭarāja**-form of Śiva, 28, 30-38 *passim*, 40, 41, 42, 49, 56, 57, 68; dwarf's identity, 34; iconography of image, 32ff.; line-drawing of, 29 (Fig. 4); worship of, 36f.

**Nāthamuni**, 134, 139

**Navarātri**, 50, 116, 169, 174, 180, 205, 206n.4

**Nāyaṇmār(s)**, 52f., 57, 62, 132, *Glossary*

**Neem-tree**, 194

**Nica-devatā(s)**, 207n.7

**Nyāya**, 155

## P

**Padmāsana**-posture, 25, 67, 132, *Glossary*

**Padmāvatī**, 118, 120

**Paṇṇi**, 230

**Pañcaloha**-alloy, 44

**Pañcāmṛta**-relish, 231

**Pañcarātra Āgama(s)**, 105, 114, 161n.17

**Pañcāyatana-pūjā**, 126, 162n.27, *Glossary*, *see also* **Pūjā**

**Pāṇḍavas**, 97

**Paṇṇi Uttiram**, 232

**Paraśurāma**, 189, *Glossary*

**Pārāyaṇa**, 80, 100

**Pārthasārathi**, 98, 100, 116, 159n.2

**Pārvatī**, 5, 6, 9, 36, 40, 41, 44ff., 48, 48-52 *passim*, 177, 190, 198, 205; alternate names, 49f.; line-drawing of, 47 (Fig. 6); worship of, 50ff.

Patañjali, 30, 72n.9, 88  
 Peacock, 94, 203f., 227, 228f., 248n.14  
 Pilgrimage, 221, 223f.  
 Pittsburgh, PA (USA), 123, 161n.23  
 Poṅgal, 51, 276  
 Pralaya, 108  
 Prasāda(m), 20, 35, 142, 191, 222, 245,  
     *Glossary*  
 Prasthāna traya, 98, 163n.42  
 Pūjā, 17, 19, 20, 37, 43, 91, 109, 116, 126,  
     127, 141, 142, 163n.36, 215, 221, 241,  
     *Glossary*; see also *Pañcāyatana-pūjā*  
 Puruṣārtha(s), 79, *Glossary*  
 Pustaka, 56, 63, 134, 150, 202, *Glossary*

## R

Rādhā, 94  
 Radhakrishnan, S., 38, 163n.42  
 Rāghavendra, 151-159 *passim*; biography  
     of, 152ff.; career as Mādhvaite, 153ff.;  
     final words, 156f.; line-drawing of, 149  
     (Fig. 23); literary accomplishments,  
     155; miracles by, 155; *samādhi* and  
     tomb, 156f.; wife's suicide, 154, 155f.;  
     worship by followers, 157, 158f.,  
     163n.45  
 Rāhu-kāla, 168, *Glossary*  
 Rājārājesvara, 49  
 Rākṣasa(s), 181, *Glossary*  
 Raktavira, 173  
 Rāma, Lord, 76-82 *passim*, 83ff., 127, 133,  
     154, 161n.16, 162n.33, 245; birth  
     celebrations, 79, 111; cultural  
     expressions of cult, 79f.; line-drawing  
     of, 77 (Fig. 10); model for life, 82;  
     versions of his "story" 79f.  
 Rāmakrishna Paramahansa, 66  
 Ramakrishna Mission (Mylapore), 62  
 Rāmaliṅga, 64-72 *passim*, 164n.44;  
     hagiography of, 67ff.; line-drawing of,  
     65 (Fig. 9); similarities to Bhīṣma, 71;  
     Śuddhasanmārga system, 69, 71f.;  
     voluntary death & transfiguration, 70f.

Rāmānuja, 57, 64, 114, 134, 138-143  
     *passim*, 145, 161n.18, 162n.31ff.,  
     163n.42; alternate names, 143,  
     162n.33; burial site, 140; hagiography,  
     138ff.; line-drawing of, 135 (Fig. 21);  
     liberal views, 139; literary activity,  
     139f.  
 Rāmāyana, 79, 80, 83, 87, 159n.4  
 Rāmeśvaram, 22, 159n.1  
 Raṅganātha, Lord, 76, 106-117 *passim*,  
     133, 140, 160-161 n.11ff.; annual  
     festival cycle at Śrīraṅgam temple,  
     111ff.; line-drawing of, 107 (Fig. 17);  
     other south Indian temples & shrines to  
     Lord Raṅganāthan, 116, 159n.1  
 Rudrākṣa-beads, 26, 56, 64, 72n.5, 221,  
     223  
 Rukmini, 94, 101

## S

Śabari Hill(s), Kerala, 161n.19 219, 221,  
     224  
 Śaiva Āgama(s), 73n.10, 104  
 Śaiva Śiddhānta, 35, 69  
 Śaivism, Śaiva(s), Śiva-ism, devotee(s) of  
     Śiva, 26, 30, 34, 35f., 41, 43f. 52, 63,  
     104, 116, 122, 126, 132, 159, 161n.20,  
     163n.37, 176, 178, 188, 189, 246  
     (note), *Glossary*  
 Śākta(s), 126  
 Śakti, 11, 28, 40, 41, 48, 78, 91, 100, 166,  
     170, 172, 177, 181, 183, 188, 190,  
     192, 227, 229, *Glossary*  
 Śālagrāma-stone(s), 16, 51, 120, 124-131  
     *passim*, 156; daily rites to, 127f.;  
     different aspects of Viṣṇu in, 128, 130;  
     fake stones, 128, 130; line-drawing of,  
     128 (Fig. 19); supply source in  
     Gaṇḍakī River, 124, 130; where  
     worshipped in south India, 127f.  
 Samādhi, 152, 156, 157, 158  
 Samnyāsa, Samnyāsin(s), 56, 58, 60, 61,  
     63, 64, 72n.3, 74n.26, 138, 140, 141,  
     147, 150, 153, 156, 157, 163n.38

- Saṁskāra**-sacraments, 32, 105
- Śaṅkara** (b. 788 C.E.), 20, 27, 58-64  
*passim*, 74n.23-26, 143, 145, 163n.37  
 & 42; birth at Kālāḍi (Kerala), 58;  
 centers (4 or 5) established, 61, 62;  
 disciple of Gauḍapāda, 60; his  
 disciples, 61, 62f., 74n.24; honor  
 shown images of him, 62f.; last days at  
 Kanchipuram, 62 (at Kēdārnāth); line-  
 drawing of, 59 (Fig. 8); travel by, 61f.
- Śaṅkarācārya(s)**—regional spiritual leaders,  
 at Kanchipuram, 61, 63, 74n.24; at  
 Śrīgeri, 61, 63, 74n.24
- Sarasvatī**, 50, 169, 186, 200-205 *passim*  
 206n.4, 248n.14; honor accorded to,  
 204f.; iconographic symbolism, 201ff.;  
 line-drawing of, 199 (Fig. 30);  
 personifies, *śabda*-sound, 202
- Śaṭhakopa** (dome-shaped instrument),  
 a.k.a. *Śaṭhāri*, 135 (Fig. 21, detail),  
 137, 142, 162n.32
- Śaṭhakopa** (alias Nammālvār), a.k.a. *Śaṭhāri*,  
 137, 142
- Satyabhāmā**, 94, 101
- Satyadharma Sālai**, founded by Rāmaliṅga,  
 70
- Serpents/Snakes**, 6, 26, 27, 31, 33, 106,  
 108, 120, 161n.20, 173, 192, 239,  
 248n.15; *see also* *Nāga(s)*
- Śeṣa**, 106, 108, 162n.33, 239; *see also*  
*Ādiśeṣa*, *Ananta*, *Nāga(s)*
- Śītā**, 76-82 *passim*, 84, 159n.2; identified  
 with *Lakṣmī*, 76, 78; incarnation of *Śrī*,  
 76; line-drawing of, 80 (Fig. 10 detail);  
*Rāma's śakti*, 78
- Śiva**, 5, 6, 8, 9, 72f. notes, 166, 172, 176,  
 178, 192, 195, 213, 219, 223, 228,  
 239, 242, 247n.2, *Glossary*; *see under*  
*Liṅga*, *Mahāyogin*, *Naṭarāja*,  
*Somāskanda*
- Śivarātri**, 21, 37, 50, 168, 174, 178
- Skanda**, 38-48 *passim*, 49, 225; line-  
 drawing of, 39 (Fig. 5, detail);  
*see also* *Muruga*, *Subrahmanya*
- Smārta(s)**, 63, 96, 126, 162n.27, 163n.37,  
 243, *Glossary*
- Somāskanda**-form of *Śiva*, 24, 28, 38-48  
*passim*, 49, 161n.20, 176, 228, 230;  
 iconographic details, 38-43; image of  
 husband and father, 40; line-drawing  
 of, 39 (Fig. 5); story of *Śiva's* sexual  
 awakening, 45; temple as *Śiva's*  
 "home," 43f.; *Umā's* name, 45f.
- Sphaṭika** (crystal), 64, 124, 126, 162n.26
- Śrāddha**-rites, 245
- Śrī**, 76, 101, 108, 109, 114, 140, 181;  
*see also* *Lakṣmī*
- Śrībhāṣya** of Rāmānuja, 139
- Śrīperumbūdūr**, 138, 140, 142, 162n.34
- Śrīraṅgam**, 108, 109ff., 112, 114, 116, 133,  
 138, 139, 140, 160-161n.11-18
- Śrī-vaiṣṇava(s)/Śrī-vaiṣṇavism**, 113, 114,  
 116, 117, 127, 132, 133, 134, 136,  
 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143,  
 184, 243, *Glossary* spiritual life of,  
 116, 136f., 141ff.; two schools of, 114
- Śrīvatsa**-mole, of *Viṣṇu*, 181, 185
- Śrīṣṭi**, 30, 35, 108
- Stones**, worship of, 51f., 124f.
- Subrahmanya**, son of *Śiva*, 9, 41, 161n.20,  
 162n.25, 222, 239; *see also* *Muruga*,  
*Skanda*
- Suddhasanmārga**, founded by Rāmaliṅga, 69,  
 71f.
- Sumaṅgali-pūjā**, 156, 164n.45, *Glossary*
- Sundarēśvara**, *Śiva* at Madurai, 195 *passim*
- Sūrya**, 126; *see also* *sphaṭika(s)*
- T**
- Tamil** liturgies, 137, 139, 142
- Tanjore**, 152, 153, 154
- Tantrasārasaṅgraha**, 160n.10
- Tantrism**, influences of, 11, 26, *Glossary*
- Tāpa**-scars, 120, 141, 151, *Glossary*
- Tapasvin**, 25, *Glossary*
- Tekaḷai**, 109, 114, 120, 127, 134, 141
- Third eye**, 11n.1, 26, 27f., 33
- Tigerskin** [*vyāghracarma*], 25, 27, 31, 32, 63

*Tilaka-mark*, 6, 11n.5, 42, 164n.45, 170, 172, 177, 194, 198, 206n.5, 213, *Glossary*

*Tirukkṛvāiyār*, by Māṇikkavācakar, 55

*Tirupati/Tirumalai*, 110, 116, 117-123 *passim*, 130, 133, 160n.8, 231; *see also* Veṅkaṭeśvara

*Tiruvācakam*, by Māṇikkavācakar, 55, 56, 67, 73n.13

*Tiruvāṇaikkāval*, 22, 72n.2

*Tiruvāṇṇamalai*, 22, 49, 57

*Tiruvārūṭpā*, by Rāmaliṅga, 67

*Tiruvāymoli* (utterances of Nammālvār), 136, 137

*Tiruvempāvai* by Māṇikkavācakar, 55

*Trees* (sacrality implied), 132, 133, 194, 208n.19, 232, 244, 246n.; *see also* *Bilva-leaf*, *Tulasī-plant*

*Triplicane*, 98, 100, 116, 143, 159n.2

*Tripuṇḍra-mark*, a.k.a. *Tiryak-puṇḍra*, 17, 26, 33, 57, 63, *Glossary*

*Triśūla*, Śiva's trident, 27, 41, 170, 173, 192

*Tulasī-plant*, 19, 72n.5, 113, 131, 136, 141, 150, 164n.44, 241-246 *passim*, 248n.18, 249n.19; beads made from, 72n.5, 141, 150, 157, 221, 222f.; leaves, 127, 141, 150, 249n.19; line-drawing of, 240 (Fig. 35); *see also* 125 (Fig. 19, detail); medicinal properties of, 158, 245, worship of, 151, 243f.; worship using, 113

*Tulsidās*, 79, 246

*Tyāgarāja*, 49, 79

## U

*Udipi*, 147

*Umā*, 40, 41, 42, 45f.;

*see also* *Somāskanda*

*Upāsana*, 87f.

*Upavīta-cord*, 6, 26, 32, 43, 56, 60, 63, 84, 104, 120, 133, 141, 150, 160n.12, 163n.38, 212f., 227, *Glossary*; *see also* *Yajñopavīta-cord*

*Ūrdhva-puṇḍra*, 12n.5, 84, 109, 120f., (127,) 134, 141, 157, 220, *Glossary*

## V

*Vāhana(s)*, 5, 6, 7, 9, 27, 38, 73n.14, 85, 158, 166, 170, 173, 177, 198, 201, 219, 227, 228, 229, *Glossary*

*Vaikhānasa Āgama*, 105, 122

*Vaiṣṇuṭha*, 113 (*Ekādasi*), 116 (*Bhūloka V.*), 133

*Vaiṣṇava(s)*, *Vaiṣṇavabhakta(s)*, *Viṣṇuite(s)*, *Viṣṇu devotee(s)*, 52, 78, 80, 91, 96, 102, 122, 126, 127, 134, 138, 159, 184, ...239 *etc.*, *Glossary*

*Vaiṣṇu*, 227, 229

*Varāha*, 85, 118, 119, *Glossary*

*Vaṭakaḷai*, 114, 120, 127, 134, 141

*Vedānta*, 143, 155, 163n.37

*Vedārthasaṅgraha* by Rāmānuja, 139

*Veṅkaṭeśvara* ("Bālāji"), 110, 117-123

*passim*, 127, 133, 134, 160n.8f., 162n.27, 184, 225, 231; ambiguous identity of deity, 118, 160n.9, 161n.20; diversity of worshippers, 122; iconography of, 119ff.; line-drawing of, 115 (Fig. 18); "little Tirupatis," 123; pilgrims throng to him, 121; "story" of, 118f.; wealthiest temple, 17, 123; worship at the temple, 121ff.

*Veṅṅopāla* (Kṛṣṇa), 92-96 *passim*; diversity of worshippers, 96; line-drawing of, 93 (Fig. 13); symbolism of imagery, 94, 96

*Vibhūti*-ashes, 19, 20, 26, 34, 36, 63, 66, 191, 192, 222, *Glossary*

*Vindhyaka-caturthi*, 9f.

*Vīra-stone(s)*, to local heroes, 218

*Viṣṇu*, 76-164 *passim* (Section Three) and 18f., 72n.8, 109-111 (slumber of), 213, 219, 239, 242f. (cf. 131), 246, *Glossary*; *also see under* *Avatāra(s)*, *Bālakṛṣṇa*, *Gītācārya* [Kṛṣṇa], *Guruvāiyārappan*, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Narasimha*, *Pārthasārathi*, *Rāma*,

· Raṅganātha, Tulasi-plant, Varāha,  
 Venkaṭeśvara, Veṅupgopāla [Kṛṣṇa];  
 Śrī-vaiṣṇava(s), Śrī-vaiṣṇavism, etc.  
 Viṣṇutattvaviniṣya, by Madhva, 148  
 Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, by Śaṅkara, 60  
 Vivekānanda, Swami, 163n.41  
 Vows, *See* Vrata(s)  
 Vrata(s) vow(s), 180, 186, 223f.

### Y

Yajñopavīta-cord, 109, 200; *see also*  
 Upavīta-cord

Yakṣiṇī(s), 181, 207n.9, *Glossary*  
 Yāmuna (10th cent. figure), 114, 140  
 Yantra(s), 197, 208n.21  
 Yoga, Yogic calm, 26, 27, 30, 85, 108  
 Yoga-daṇḍa, 25  
 Yoganidrā, 108  
 Yogapaṭṭa, 85, 220  
 Yoni, 14, 16, 17, 18, 40  
 Yoni-mukhā, 17  
 Yuga(s) [Dvāpara, Tretā], 154 *passim*,  
*Glossary; see also* Kali Yuga





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